Huskers Illustrated

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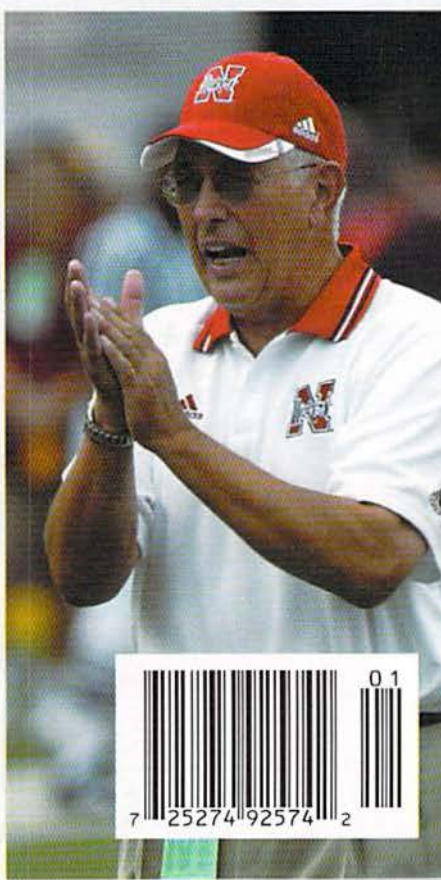
Shake-up



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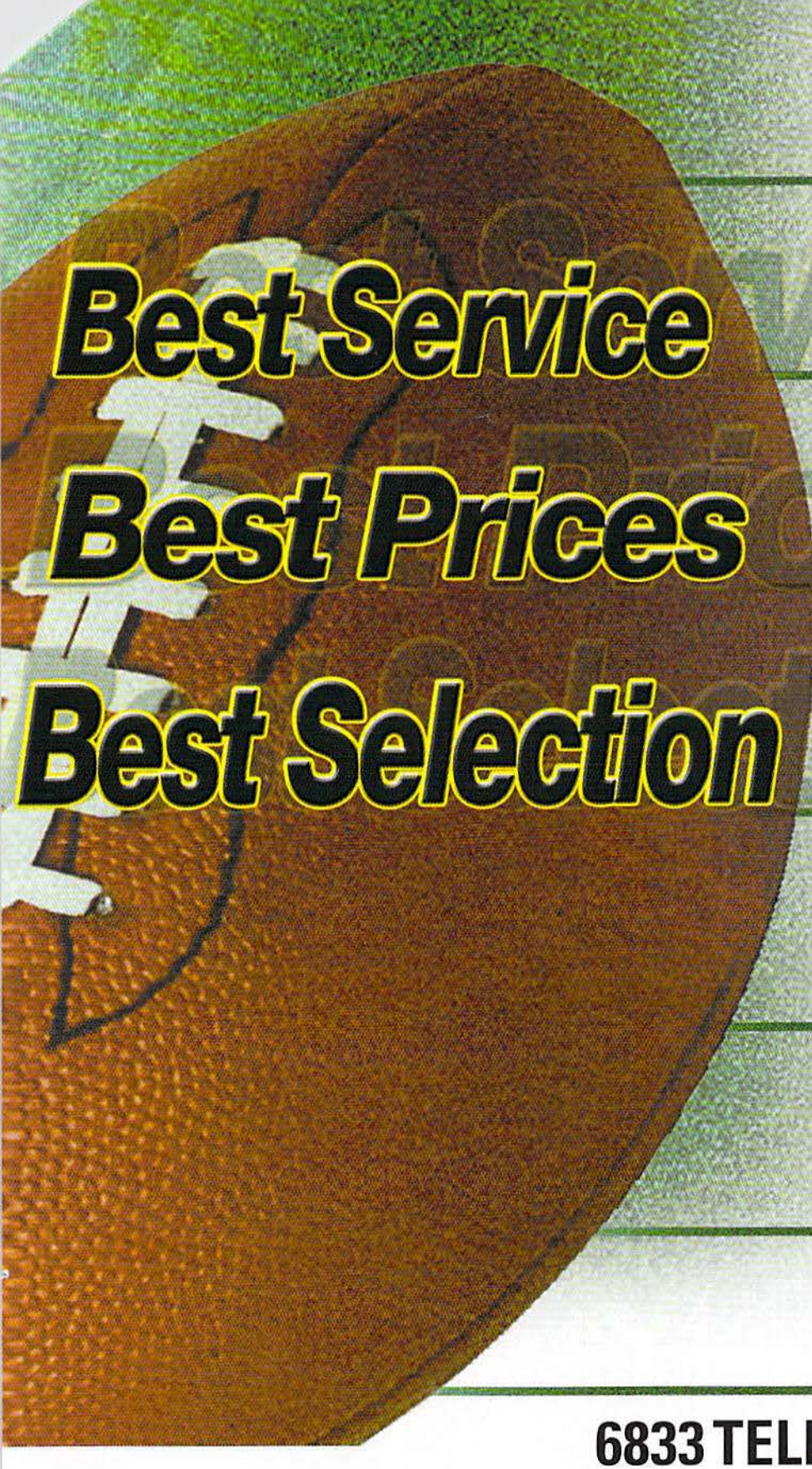

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FROM THE EDITOR

The Next Chapter

Solich looking to replace assistants as Huskers prepare for bowl game

Brian HILL

THE CALLER seemed to be in denial.

"These things just don't happen at Nebraska," he repeated several times during our conversation.

Well, they did.

Since our last edition, Nebraska Coach Frank Solich dismissed three assistants and announced that he would no longer be the offensive coordinator. The next day, Athletic Director Bill Byrne announced his decision to leave for Texas A&M.

In this day and age, football coaches and assistant coaches come and go all the time, but not at Nebraska, which has had just three head coaches in 40 years. Entering the 2002 season, the coaching staff boasted 142 years of combined experience at Nebraska.

Almost lost in the shuffle of the staff changes was Nebraska's NCAA-record 34th consecutive bowl bid. That was one of the few streaks that survived the tumultuous 2002 season.

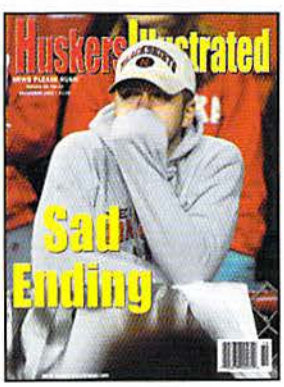
The 7-6 Huskers will face Mississippi for the first time in the Dec. 27 Independence Bowl in Shreveport, La. The Rebels needed a win in their final game to become bowl eligible at 6-6. It's not the greatest bowl but a bowl, nonetheless, and one last chance for this team to prove it is better than its record.

The timing of Byrne's departure was apparently not connected to the football staff shake-up the previous day but made for one of the strangest periods in athletic department history.

Solich said he hoped to have at least some of his new coaches in place before the bowl game, but nothing appeared imminent as this edition went to press.

And a search committee had been established to find a replacement for Byrne, with a successor likely to be named in January. Byrne accomplished a great deal in his 11 years at Nebraska, and we wish him well. It certainly wasn't easy to replace the legendary Bob Devaney and make a number of tough decisions.

Solich certainly knows about tough decisions, after firing defensive coordinator Craig Bohl, 30-year secondary coach George Darlington and rush ends coach Nelson Barnes. And finding quality replacements added to the crunch as Solich and Co. try to finish the season on a positive note while continuing to shape a key recruiting class.



You can read more about the changes on the football staff and in the athletic director's office in this edition of Huskers Illustrated. We also have a preview of bowl opponent Ole Miss, which features quarterback Eli Manning, the son of Ole Miss legend Archie Manning and brother of Indianapolis quarterback Peyton Manning.

This issue also includes a look back at the 2002 season, one that started with the modernizing of uniforms and naysayers predicting doom for the program. "Crossroads?" read our main headline in the Football Yearbook. Was this season just a bump in the road or . . .?

With so many other things going on, it might be difficult to focus on a football game two days after Christmas, but a win could start the healing process that this program and everyone connected with it so badly need.

Season's greetings. ■

On The Cover

The South Stadium offices went through a major shake-up in just two days as Athletic Director Bill Byrne (top) announced he was leaving for Texas A&M the day after football assistants (from left) Nelson Barnes, Craig Bohl and George Darlington were relieved of their duties. *Photos and design by Scott Bruhn*

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12 Difficult Decision

Three days after the end of a disappointing 7-6 regular season, an emotional Frank Solich announced the firing of three assistants. *By Mike Babcock*

20 2002 Season Recap

What it all adds up to is "as tough of a year as I've had in the coaching profession," fifth-year Coach Frank Solich said.

No Rushing It

Don't expect Willie Amos to return for spring football practice. "I'm optimistic I'll be ready sometime, but not for the spring," the junior defensive back said recently.

"There's no point in rushing it, no point in going out there and tearing it up again."

"It" refers to his left knee, in which he suffered tears to two major ligaments during a scrimmage last spring. The severity of the injury was such that Amos couldn't begin the rehabilitation as quickly as he would have had it been a "normal" anterior cruciate ligament tear.

He couldn't put any pressure on the knee for a month and a half.

The best-case scenario, according to Amos, is to participate in summer conditioning, for the first time since he's been at Nebraska, and then play in the fall, "Lord willing," he said.

That would be good news for the Cornhusker secondary, which could use his speed. Amos is the team's fastest player — he has run the 40-yard dash in 4.45 seconds.

Where the secondary should use his speed might be another matter. Amos was working at left cornerback in the spring, after starting six games at free safety as a sophomore.

His interest in cornerback was based on wanting "to be able to play two different positions," he said. "That's all I wanted to do. Personally, I don't think I'm a good corner. The reason they (coaches) think I'm a good corner is because of my speed. But speed only gets you so far.

"If you don't have technique, you don't have jack."

High jumping illustrates the point. "Some athletes have hops and can get over," he said. "But when it comes to a certain point, the man with the best technique is getting over the bar."

Midway through the spring, Amos hadn't learned sufficient technique to get over the bar at corner. He has watched the other corners and intends to study videotape of cornerback play.

For the time being, however, "I don't know; I'm not a good corner," he said.

Amos has tried to keep his situation in perspective, almost from the moment the injury occurred, when he landed awkwardly after getting tangled up with split end Wilson Thomas.

His reaction to the injury was, "God help me get through this," said Amos. "The usual thing you hear is, 'Why me?' That's something I shied away from. I refused to say that.

"I accepted it pretty fast, I think. It was just the outside pressure."

Those around him were impatient, and their impatience rubbed off on him.

That, in turn, "put a lot of pressure on me to get better," he said. "My mind can get better, my heart can get better, but if my knee's not better, it's not going to get any better.

"It made me think I wasn't working hard, and after a while, it gets to wear and tear on your mind and heart, and you've got to rely on faith just to get through it. That's what got me through."

Amos has been methodical in his rehabilitation, which is now five days a week instead of the initial seven, twice a day. He began lifting, upper body, about two months ago and he hoped to be jogging by the end of this month — if not then in January. The rehab process will continue during the season.

Watching from the sideline has been difficult because of the team's problems, but "it doesn't hurt me just to watch, not to be out there," Amos said. "If I was meant to be out there, I'd be out there.

"But the thing that gets me is, I want to do regular things, like when I walk down the hall, I want to take off running because that's what I used to do. I used to jog down the hall, go home and practice a little jump rope. I just want to do normal things. I want to be confident with my knee."

He misses being able to jump rope as much as he misses football, maybe more. He is a world-class jump-roper and could jump with one leg if he were so inclined.

But jumping on one leg, "you get only half the show," he said.

Amos is noticeably bigger upper body because of the lifting he has been able to do. But he hasn't bulked up. He dropped from 185 to 165 immediately after the injury. He weighs 177 now.

Even though people have shown concern about the injury, that concern often seems misplaced, according to Amos, because it always focuses on how soon he'll be able to come back.

"Hey, whatever it involves me to do, I'll do. Don't worry about it," he said. "This thing didn't happen on schedule. I'm sure it's not going to get back on schedule." ■

Willie Amos puts on a jump rope demonstration during Nebraska's "School is Cool" event April 9, 2001.

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LOHR RETURNING

Nose tackle Jason Lohr plans to petition the Big 12 for an additional season of eligibility, after missing last season because of a knee injury, suffered during a scrimmage in mid-August.

Lohr told the Lincoln Journal Star of his intention following the Colorado game.

As is the case with defensive back Willie Amos, however, Lohr told the newspaper he might not be sufficiently recovered from the injury to participate in spring practice.

"It'll be close. Spring practice is important, but I don't want to push it," he said.

Lohr was granted a medical hardship this season, his fifth at Nebraska, after suffering an injury to the same knee during the third game of what would have been his senior season in 2001.

Jason Lohr

He was the Cornhuskers' strongest defensive lineman going into the season.

Lohr started every game during the 2000 season and has 90 career tackles, including 15 for losses totaling 57 yards, nine quarterback sacks and 18 quarterback hurries.

Lohr told the Journal Star that the Cornhuskers' problems this season were, in part, a result of lack of unity. "It seems like players just want to go their own way," he said.

Lohr's return would bolster the interior, which will lose only one senior of note, Jon Clanton.

SOLID ACADEMICS

The football team struggled in other areas but not in the classroom, as 24 Cornhuskers earned Academic All-Big 12 recognition, including 18 first-team honorees.

Senior rush end Chris Kelsay led the way, making the first team for a fourth consecutive year. Only four other Cornhusker football players have earned that distinction: Mike Stigge (1989-92), Rob Zatechka (1991-94), Brian Shaw (1996-99) and Dave Volk (1998-2001).

Senior rush end Demoine Adams, senior rover Aaron Terpening, junior fullback Judd Davies and junior rush end Trevor Johnson all were first-team selections for a third year in a row.

Sophomore Chad Sievers, another first-team selection, has a 4.0 grade-point average. The back-up middle linebacker from Valley, Neb., is majoring in business administration.

The other first-team honorees, by class, were: (seniors) Joe Chrisman, Will Dabbert, Troy Hassebroek, John Klem, David Kolowski and Kyle Ringenberg; (juniors) Chad Buller, Phil Peetz and Pat Ricketts; (sophomores) Philip Bland and Barrett Ruud; and (freshman) Shane Siegel.

The second-team selections were seniors Ben Cornelsen and Gabe Fries, juniors Ryon Bingham and Kyle Larson and sophomores Mike Erickson and Steve Kriewald.

First-team selections must have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.20. ■

QUICK HITS

What's Happening In Nebraska Athletics?

EFFECTS ON RECRUITING

Nebraska's football tradition might offset any negative effects the Cornhuskers' 7-6 record might have on recruiting. Consider David Horne's experience.

The true freshman I-back out of Omaha Central was on the Colorado sideline last season, when the Buffaloes defeated Nebraska 62-36 at Boulder. "I remember a lot of excitement," he said, on the Monday before this year's Colorado game. "I remember looking across the field and seeing a lot of down faces, a lot of frustration. And I remember seeing a lot of shock from the Nebraska side."

Nevertheless, he picked the Huskers. His decision wasn't based on one game.

ALL-CONFERENCE SHUTOUT

For the first time since 1958, Nebraska didn't place at least one player on the Associated Press all-conference first team — which included seven of the 26 players from Oklahoma.

Seniors DeJuan Groce and Josh Brown were second-team selections, Groce as both a defensive back and all-purpose back (kick returner) and Brown as the place-kicker.

Groce and Brown were on the coaches' all-conference first team, Groce as a punt returner.

Center John Garrison, offensive tackles Richie Incognito and Dan Vili Waldrop, rush end Chris Kelsay, defensive back Philip Bland and punter Kyle Larson received AP honorable mention.

ALL-AMERICAN

Even though he didn't make the AP all-conference first team, Groce was included on the American Football Coaches Association All-America first team as a kick returner.

He returned three punts for touchdowns this season and averaged 18.0 yards per return. His average ranked second in the nation following the Colorado game, but rankings won't be final until after bowl games. The NCAA made that statistical change this season.

LESLIE SIDELINED

True freshman offensive lineman Jermaine Leslie suffered a dislocated ankle during practice the week before the Colorado game and will be sidelined "for some time," Coach Frank Solich said.

Leslie, who sat out this season as a redshirt, figures prominently in the Cornhuskers' plans.

NO BOWL FOR BOWLING

Senior tight end Jon Bowling missed the Colorado game and won't be able to play in the bowl game, because of a knee injury suffered early in Nebraska's loss at Kansas State.

Bowling, who was hampered by injuries throughout his career, was second on the depth chart, behind Aaron Golliday. He caught four passes for 86 yards and a touchdown this season.

TRI-PLAYERS OF THE YEAR

Husker seniors Amber Holmquist, Laura Pilakowski and Greichaly Cepero shared the honor as Big 12 volleyball player of the year. Freshman Jennifer Saleaumua joined them on the all-conference team.

Holmquist, a 6-foot-4 senior middle blocker, led the Big 12 in hitting percentage (.424) and blocks per game (2.27). Pilakowski had a .343 hitting percentage and averaged a team-best 3.76 kills per game. Cepero, the 2000 Big 12 player of the year, averaged 12.45 assists, 1.22 blocks and 2.45 digs.

Pilakowski was named to the Verizon Academic All-America first team for a third time. Karen Dahlgren, Virginia Stahr and Janet Kruse were Nebraska's only other three-time, first-team selections. Holmquist was a second-team selection.

Pilakowski, Cepero, Holmquist, senior Lindsay Wischmeier and juniors Jenae Dowling, Anna Schrad and Sara Westling all were named to the Academic All-Big 12 first team.

STRONG FINISH FINALLY ENDS

Coach John Walker's Husker soccer team won 11 of 12 games down the stretch to reach the NCAA Tournament's round of 16 before losing at Santa Clara 3-2.

Santa Clara was the defending NCAA champion.

The Sweet 16 appearance was Nebraska's seventh in a row. The Huskers also won a fifth conference tournament title. The team loses four seniors, including All-American Christine Latham. Latham finished the season with 16 goals, including five in Nebraska's final five games. ■

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Earning Respect

Senior rush end Kelsay made the most of his limited opportunities

Mike BABCOCK

THE RESPECT Chris Kelsay has earned during his time at Nebraska is reflected in fact that he received All-Big 12 honorable mention from both the coaches and the Associated Press.

At first glance that might seem no big deal, a disappointment even, considering the senior rush end was a pre-season first-team all-conference selection and an All-America candidate.

But the honorable mention must be taken in context. Kelsay was able to play in only three of the Cornhuskers' eight conference games because of a pulled hamstring.

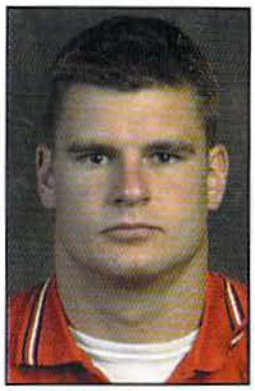
The injury occurred early in the McNeese State game, as he was rushing the passer, a skill that will enhance his chances of earning a job in the National Football League.

Kelsay, a big-time player, made the most of his limited opportunities.

Obviously, this has been a frustrating season, and not just because of the injury, the first to cause him to miss a significant amount of time since he began playing football.

"Our record has been disheartening, tough to choke down," he said.

Consider that he grew up in the state and followed his brother Chad from Auburn High to Nebraska, where he played the same position and wore the same jersey number, 57.



Chris Kelsay missed five games with a hamstring injury.

Like his brother, he is a captain. Unlike his brother, however, he has had to endure the Cornhuskers' first six-loss season since 1961. That has been a bitter pill for everyone associated with the program. But few can know the bitterness for someone whose childhood dream has turned nightmarish.

Kelsay tries to be philosophical about the injury and not being able to play.

"You learn from it," he said. "It will better me as a person, better my character. I'll live. It's not a situation where you can beat yourself up. You have no control over it."

He hasn't always looked at things that way, with such equanimity.

"My whole outlook on athletics and myself as a person has changed the past couple of years," he said. "Granted, I'm going to play football for as long as I can. I'm not going to give it up because of the injury. But it definitely makes you think at any given time, any play can end your career."

Kelsay has endured some difficult times at Nebraska, personal situations including the murder of his grandfather, through involvement in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

That involvement, not coincidentally, also began "a couple of years ago," he said. "It's not really something I preach about or go out and push off on other people.

"But it's something I'm really concerned about."

Chris Bubak, who heads the campus FCA ministry, has played a significant role. "I have one-on-one Bible studies with him, and he's really put things in perspective," said Kelsay.

"He's helped me through some tough times. It's helped a lot."

His brother Chad also has helped a lot through the tough times, as only a brother can.

If not for encouragement from Chad, he might not have made it to his senior season. "I hate to say that because I'm not a quitter," Chris said. "I don't hang my hat up at the drop of a dime.

"But I think it would have been tough without him."

Even though he was a highly regarded member of Frank Solich's first recruiting class, with the ability to play without redshirting, "I didn't know if I was cut out for this game, whether I was cut out for the University of Nebraska," he said. "My brother played a huge role, made it a lot easier."

His self-doubts were "nothing drastic," the kinds of things most student-athletes have to overcome early on. In addition to the time constraints of football — practices, meetings and lifting — there were the demands of the classroom. He is a finance major, with a 3.549 grade-point average.

He was among six NCAA Division I-A student-athletes to receive National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame post-graduate scholarships this season. And he is one of only five Cornhusker football players ever to be four-time, first-team academic all-conference selections.

In retrospect, "the thoughts I had when I was a freshman and sophomore really were ignorant," he said. "I would have been dishonoring not only myself but also my teammates and my coaching staff, the work they put into getting me here. I doubt I would ever have quit. But it was tough."

Those who have watched him at Nebraska might be surprised to hear him admit to those personal uncertainties. He hid his doubts well. But then, that's the nature of football players.

From the beginning, however, he was deserving of respect, just from the way he carried himself. ■

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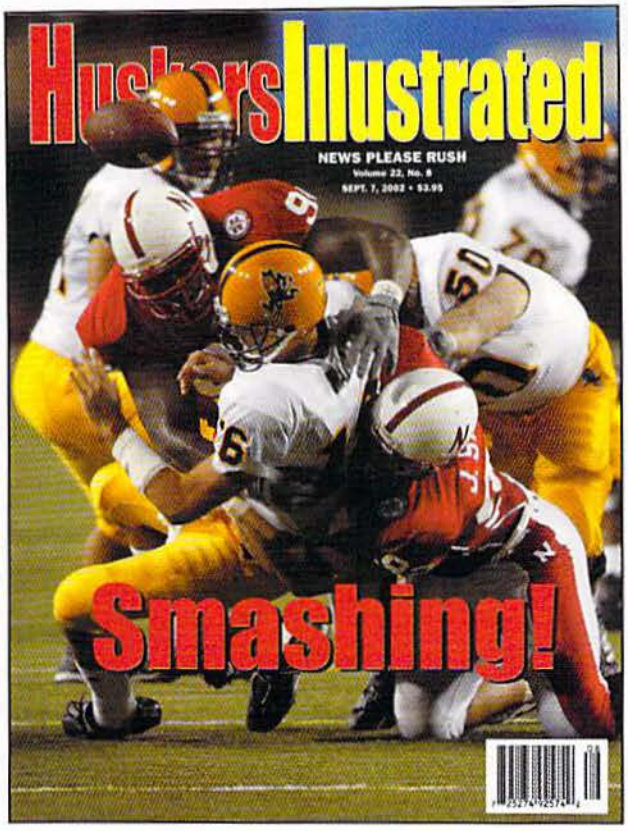
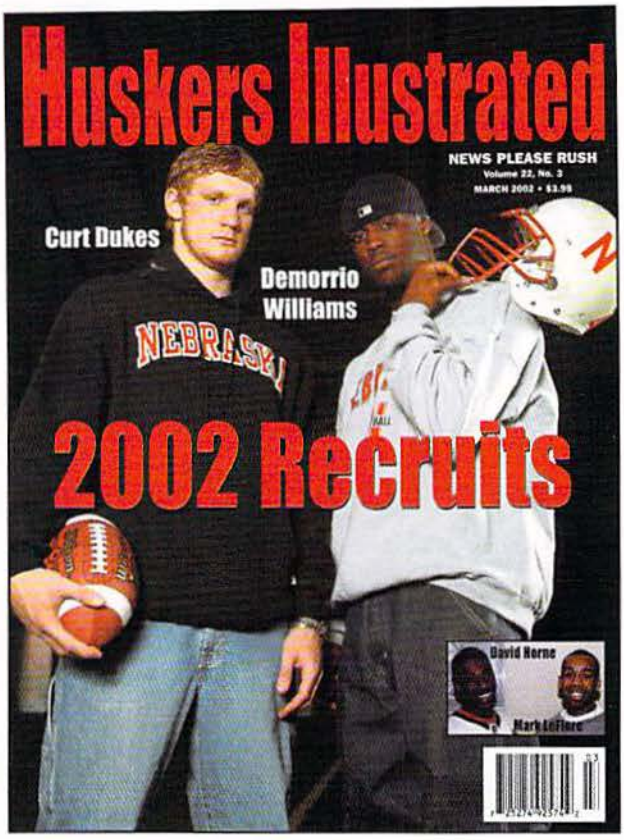
Happy Holidays . . .





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. . . And Best Wishes in 2003

'That's On Us'

Huskers knew coaching changes were possible but were shocked when it actually happened

Terry DOUGLASS

THE TASTE OF DEFEAT was just a few minutes hold when Nebraska defensive coordinator Craig Bohl made the rounds to each of his players, shook their hand, gave them a hug and offered words of encouragement.

Bohl told his Blackshirts that they had battled hard, were in the game until the end, but that it just wasn't meant to be as the Cornhuskers fell to Colorado 28-13.

With all the speculation surrounding Bohl's job status at the time, nose tackle Jon Clanton said he didn't know what to make of Bohl's gesture. What Clanton and his teammates probably didn't want to admit was that in all likelihood, Bohl was saying goodbye.

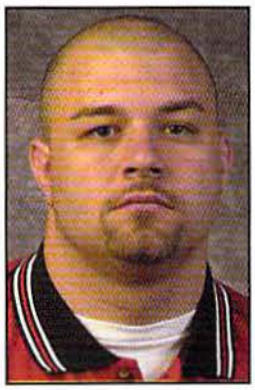
"We didn't actually know what was going on," Clanton said. "There were a lot of rumors and stuff, but now, I kind of wish I would have known. "I'd actually like to see him now and give him a hug and tell him I'll miss him."

Clanton's comments were made on Dec. 2, standing outside of Memorial Stadium as he left a team meeting called by Coach Frank Solich. Solich announced that Bohl had been fired along with rush ends coach Nelson Barnes and secondary coach George Darlington.

Regardless of what fans may have thought of the embattled defensive coordinator, Clanton said Bohl will be missed by his players.

"Coach Bohl always came in and always supported all of us," Clanton said. "Coach Bohl was a leader on this defense and he's going to be real, real missed here again next year. I think each player would say that."

Although Solich declined to say exactly when Bohl was fired, rush end Trevor Johnson said there were signs that Bohl might have known or at least surmised that the Colorado game would be his last with the Huskers.



Senior Jon Clanton said the players have to accept some blame.

"It seemed like he talked a lot more from his heart before the last game," Johnson said. "He just really spilled his guts out and his feelings and there were little indications here and there."

Like everyone else in the state, the players had heard talk of possible changes. Still, Clanton said it didn't soften the blow when the announcements came down.

"There were a lot of rumors going on, and a lot of us have opinions and a lot of us didn't know what to think, but bottom line: We didn't know," Clanton said. "We're not used to coaches leaving at Nebraska."

Johnson, who missed the team meeting to take a test, heard the news from teammates.

"I'm pretty shocked," he said. "It sounded like a few things were going to happen, but I'm just pretty shocked by it now."

For many of the players, there was also a sense of feeling at least partly to blame for the shakeup. The firings came on the heels of a 7-6 regular season that saw the defense allow an average of 23.7 points per game — the highest since 1957.

The first signs of a defensive falloff crept in with a 62-36 loss at Colorado last season, as the Buffaloes scored the most points ever allowed by the Huskers. Overall, NU is 7-8 in its past 15 games, and the defense has given up an average of 35 points in losses to four top 25-ranked opponents this season.

"You can't help but feel somewhat responsible," Johnson said. "The coaches, they can only do so much. Us players, we're the ones out there making the difference, and we messed up a few times and made the coaches look real bad, so you can't help but feel a little bit responsible."

Clanton agreed.

"Obviously, it hurts me," Clanton said. "There have been some games where the defense hasn't played well, and you can't blame the coaches. A lot of guys could sit here and say that it was the coaches' fault, but when it comes down to it, you look on the field and there were a lot of missed tackles and a lot of breakdowns. That's on us as, not the coaches."

Following the Kansas State loss, rover Philip Bland said that one of the most upsetting things about the 36-point blowout was that he knew how many fans would react.

"It really (stinks) when you go out there and play like that, and you know you're going to hear all the coaches getting reamed out," Bland said. "Any man with any amount of dignity has to know how that makes you feel. It's our fault, but the coaches are having to take the responsibility."

Without much of a chance to digest the new information, Clanton and Johnson were asked if they thought changing assistants would make a big difference. Nebraska is a program known for the continuity of its coaching staff. Former coaching great Tom Osborne had only let go a few assistants in his 25 years as the Huskers' helm.

"I guess you could say that some changes probably did need to occur," Johnson said. "I'm sure these are probably the right changes, but I don't know. We'll see what happens.

"Right now, whether these are the right changes or not, we needed change, and this could be the right thing. If anything, just a change, period, I think is going to help us."

Clanton didn't think firing coaches was the answer but said that only time will tell.

"You've got seniors leaving and new guys coming in, and if some new guys come in and all of the sudden, the program does 10 times better, it will look like the right move," Clanton said. "You never can tell. You don't know."

That's not to say Clanton holds any ill will toward Solich for his decision.

"Coach Solich is the head coach and everybody is going to stick by him," Clanton said. "If he thought we needed to make some changes, well then it's his team and we're going to back him up and agree with him 100 percent." ■

Terry Douglass *is the sports editor of the Grand Island Independent. He can be reached at tdbbdouglass@netzero.net.*

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Rare Chance

Independence Bowl officials excited to have 7-6 Huskers

Curt McKEEVER

AT 7-6, NEBRASKA KNOWS how Mike Tyson must have felt after being pummeled in his last fight with Lennox Lewis.

Like the once-unstoppable neighborhood bully who finally got his comeuppance, the Huskers can't look that imposing to Mainstay Independence Bowl opponent Mississippi. Having dropped the final two games of the regular season, they hardly come barreling into Shreveport, La., for the Dec. 27 contest.

That still doesn't mean the folks in Cajun Country aren't ecstatic for the Big Red to arrive and experience their friendly little gathering.

"Politically, we needed to consider all our options," said Independence Bowl executive director Glen Krupica, referring specifically to how officials there could pass on a 7-5 Oklahoma State team that won five of its final six games — including conquests of Nebraska and Oklahoma. "But you just don't get too many chances to get a program like Nebraska's."

So the Huskers' smashmouth game might have been lacking in power this season. Their name still carries as much wallop as a Joe Frazier left hook.

"It would be significant for us to beat Nebraska with its reputation and history," said Ole Miss Coach David Cutcliffe, who's first win with the Rebels came in the 1998 Independence Bowl. "It would be a confidence builder for us because our players are very aware of how outstanding Nebraska's program has been."

Senior center Ben Claxton, a second-team All-Southeastern Conference pick, echoed that sentiment.

"We didn't know if we were going to get into a bowl game, and now we're going to play a great Nebraska team. That just adds to the excitement," he said. "They have been in the upper echelon of college football for many years."

The Rebels probably couldn't have picked a better time to go head-to-head with Nebraska.

As much as the coaches and players welcome the opportunity to end a humbling year on a positive note, these are tough times in Huskerville.

For starters, when the season began, the closest NU imagined itself coming to Shreveport in December was for the Big 12 championship in Houston.

Then, there's the matter of Frank Solich interviewing candidates to fill his offensive and defensive coordinator positions in the midst of preparations (to say nothing for NU conducting a search to find a successor to athletic director Bill Byrne).

Surely, that situation has to be a bit numbing for a lot of Huskers. Doesn't it?

"Even though we had the changes on the coaching staff, I think some of the changes they made in practice are for the best," freshman defensive tackle Le Kevin Smith said. "I mean, they've got everybody fired up on defense all practice.

"We're just like a bunch of mad dogs getting after it. I think people are starting to realize what we have here and what we need to do. People probably were just thinking that we were going to be the top dogs, and it took awhile for them to realize you've got to bear down and work."

But with NU putting the wraps on its worst season since 1961, a successful bowl appearance may be the least important issue for Solich.

With recruiting season reaching its peak, Nebraska needs to be at full staff and able to project confidence in the direction it's headed. Solich, once an accomplished baseball player, was looking to take one deep.

He knows with so much parity in talent, the onus is on coaches to give their squads an edge. He knows that, ultimately, his performance the next couple of months could determine his Nebraska coaching legacy.

The Huskers can ill afford another December of despair like the one that followed last year's 62-36 loss to Colorado. Recruiting was put on the backburner for a spell, a factor that contributed to their recruiting class being ranked No. 42 by Rivals.com.

"We are taking the necessary steps to get this program turned back around," Solich said.

By handing over the offensive coordinator duties, he hopes to spend more time communicating with players and plans to play a more active role in the defense's development.

Former Husker standout defensive tackle Jason Peter is convinced change will be good.

"That feeling (of invincibility) has been lost there," he said. "You can see it in the way they play. I don't know what's been going on there during the last five years, but there's definitely something missing in the puzzle.

". . . They have the manpower in there. "I think they just need to be coached."

Peter was volunteering his services in that area, too. And while his hell's-fire attitude couldn't hurt, Solich was hopeful there was plenty burning in the guts of current Huskers.

"We want this group of seniors to finish with a great feeling," he said. "Our seniors have done a great job of keeping this team together."

If nothing else, the Independence Bowl can serve as another testament to that will — even though they've been presented with a most un-Nebraska-like experience.

"I think the only way to look at this bowl is in a positive way," Smith said. "I mean, we've got to look at this as being one more chance to go out and show people that we can still play Husker football."

The folks at the Independence Bowl are banking on it. ■

***Curt McKeever** is a sportswriter, covering the University of Nebraska for the Lincoln Journal Star. In addition to reporting on football he is the primary beat writer for the men's basketball and baseball teams.*

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Moving

Solich gives up coordinator duties as part of coaching staff overhaul

By Mike Babcock

The timing wasn't good. But it never is in these situations.

Frank Solich acknowledged that inescapable fact on the Monday after the Colorado game, speaking to reporters in the second-floor auditorium at the South Stadium.

He was subdued, and unable to mask his emotions completely.

Earlier, in a sports information office release, he had announced that assistants Craig Bohl, George Darlington and Nelson Barnes had been relieved of their duties, effective immediately.

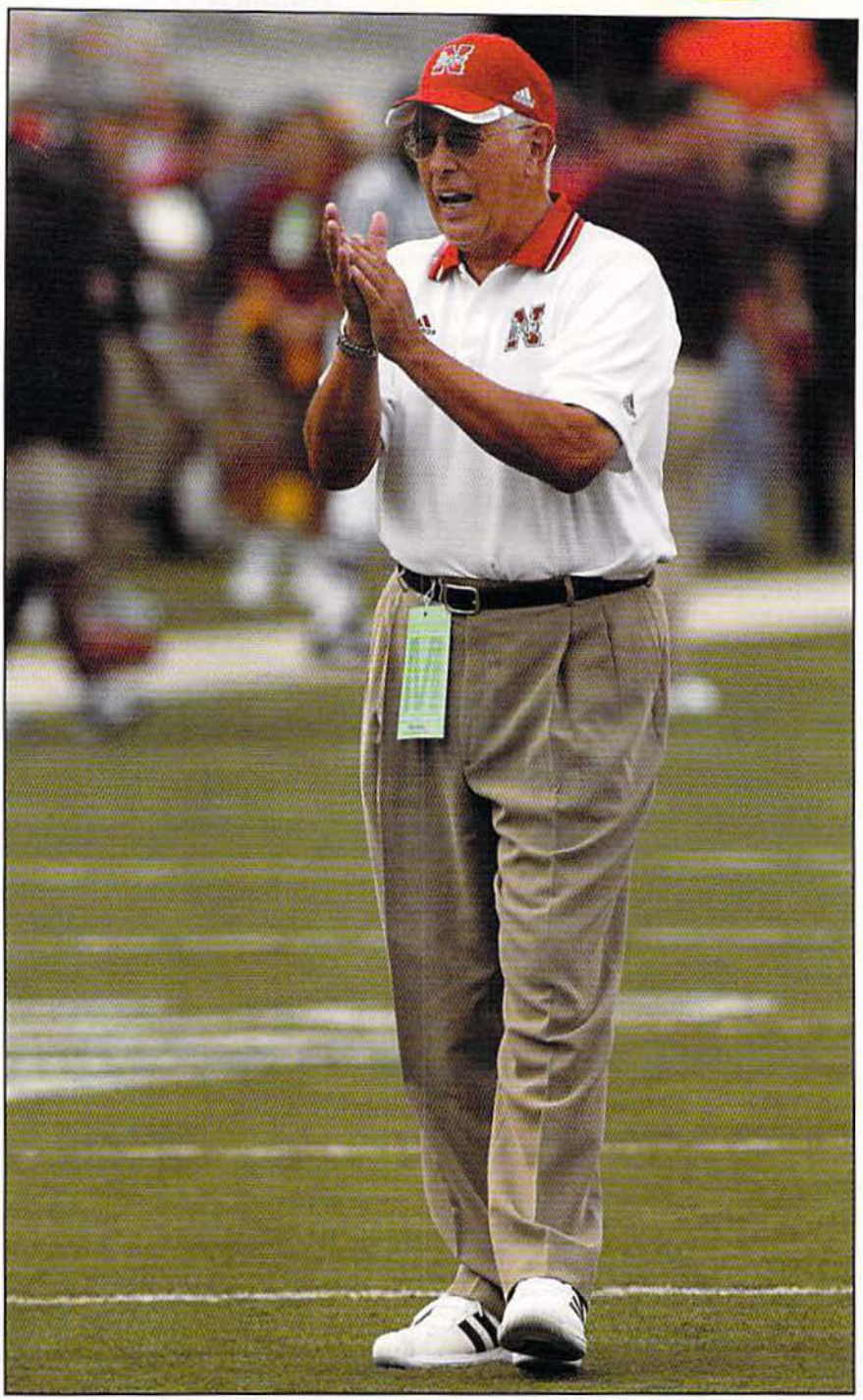
"What I felt I needed to do was to make those decisions in a manner that was best going to serve this football team, and then also best serve those coaches that are no longer going to be in this program," he said in measured tones. "Delaying it is probably not serving their best interests."

This way, they would be able to go about the business of moving on.

Solich also announced he was giving up offensive coordinator duties. Handling them along with the other responsibilities of being a head coach had become "very demanding," he said.

"I want to make sure that I'm doing everything I can in terms of communication with players, having time to meet with players, being able to step in on defensive meetings a little more often, to have a better general overview of the operation from both the offensive and defensive end."

Solich has been the offensive coordinator since taking over for Tom



Secondary coach George Darlington had been at Nebraska for 30 years, dating back to Tom Osborne's first staff.

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On

Osborne five years ago.

Osborne was his own offensive coordinator, too.

Things have changed "somewhat" since he stepped up, Solich said. "I think there are more brush fires that you put out. There are more rumors that you're dealing with in addressing the media."

Rumors that he would make changes on his staff were rampant as the regular season came to an end. Those rumors focused on Bohl, the defensive coordinator, in particular.

Bohl wouldn't be the only assistant dismissed, however.

The last time the program experienced such an enforced coaching turnover was in 1962, when Bob Devaney came from Wyoming and retained only two assistants from the previous staff.

"It's a day that I don't believe anyone ever plans for, that anyone ever feels comfortable about," Solich said.

"Certainly, there's got to be some vision involved in this job, and decision-making. There has to be an ongoing evaluation. You make decisions whether or not they are easy ones. Regardless of the relationships, the decisions have to be made that are in the best interests of the program."

The relationships in this case were long-standing. Darlington, the secondary coach, was at Nebraska for 30 years, dating to Osborne's first staff, while Bohl, the defensive coordinator and linebackers coach, played at Nebraska in the late 1970s and has been a full-time assistant since 1995.

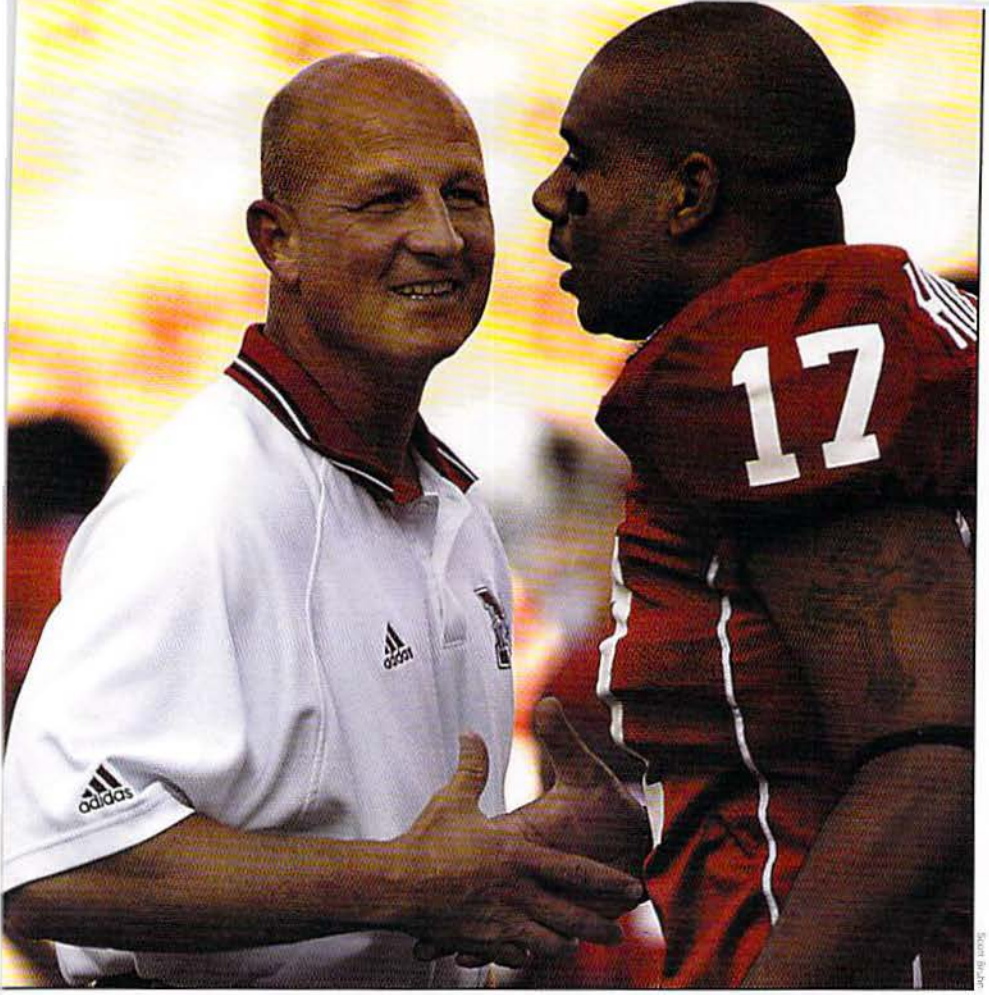
Barnes, the newest of the group, has coached the rush ends since 1997.

All three were carryovers from Osborne's staff. Such continuity has been regarded as a significant factor in the Cornhuskers' success. Osborne emphasized that when he stepped aside.

"Loyalty and continuity played a big role in his success, and I think it does in many, many cases," said

Scott Bruhn

Rush end coach Nelson Barnes (center) has coached the rush ends since 1997, while defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Craig Bohl (right) has been a member of the staff since 1995.



Craig Bohl (with linebacker T.J. Hollowell) took over as defensive coordinator in 2000, following the retirement of Charlie McBride.

Solich, Osborne's handpicked successor following the 1997 season. "So you hope that will always continue, always be a positive and always be the direction that you need to go.

"But at this point in time, it's not the right direction for us."

Osborne dismissed only three assistants in 25 years as head coach.

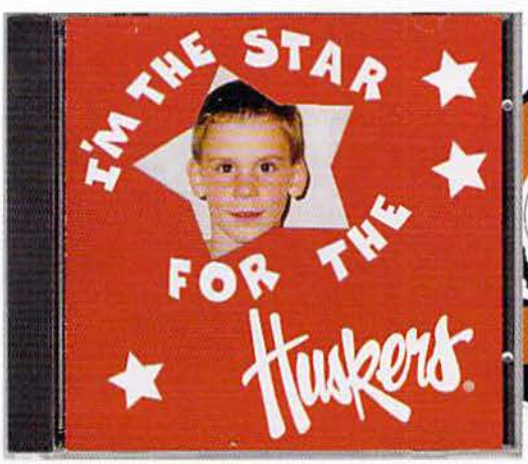
Osborne, however, never had to deal with the kind of regular season that ended with a 28-13 loss against Colorado. Solich's fifth team is 7-6, the worst record since 1961.

The Cornhuskers finished 3-6-1 that season. And Coach Bill Jennings was fired.

One season after playing for a national championship in the Rose Bowl game, Nebraska has dropped not only out of the rankings but also into the lower half of the Big 12's north division.

About the only streak of significance that has remained in tact involves bowl games. The Cornhuskers will play in a 34th consecutive post-season bowl game, the Independence Bowl on Dec. 27.

Even though bowl-game preparations are taking place while Solich is



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trying to identify defensive and offensive coordinators and continue to place sufficient emphasis on recruiting, "I wanted to be preparing for a bowl game because that's the right thing for this program, to be in a bowl game," he said.

"Does that add to what you're doing as far as time commitment in getting it done on both ends, as far as getting the staff and preparing for the game, it does. But it can be done."

And, he added, "it can be done very well."

The best-case scenario would be the have new coordinators in place before the bowl game against Mississippi, according to Solich. "But it doesn't have to be that way," he said.

He said he would consider candidates from within the program as well as from without for both coordinator positions. Jeff Jamrog is the only remaining defensive assistant.

In the absence of a defensive coordinator, Jamrog and graduate assistant Jimmy Burrow were working on the defensive game plan for the Independence Bowl, with input from Solich. And if an offensive coordinator hasn't been named beforehand, Solich said he might call the plays.

Burrow and Tim Albin, the other graduate assistant, were given increased responsibilities during the interim, including being among the allowed seven on-the-road recruiters.

The NCAA has provisions for such temporary promotions.

Both were to be considered for the full-time openings.

The new defensive coordinator will be allowed to hire his assistants, as well as adjust the defensive approach if he sees the need, Solich said, because "there is not one scheme out there that works where other schemes don't, or else everybody would be utilizing one scheme in college football.

"What I'm getting at is, philosophically this will be a tough, hard-nosed football team. That's the approach we've taken over the years on defense, the approach we've taken on offense.

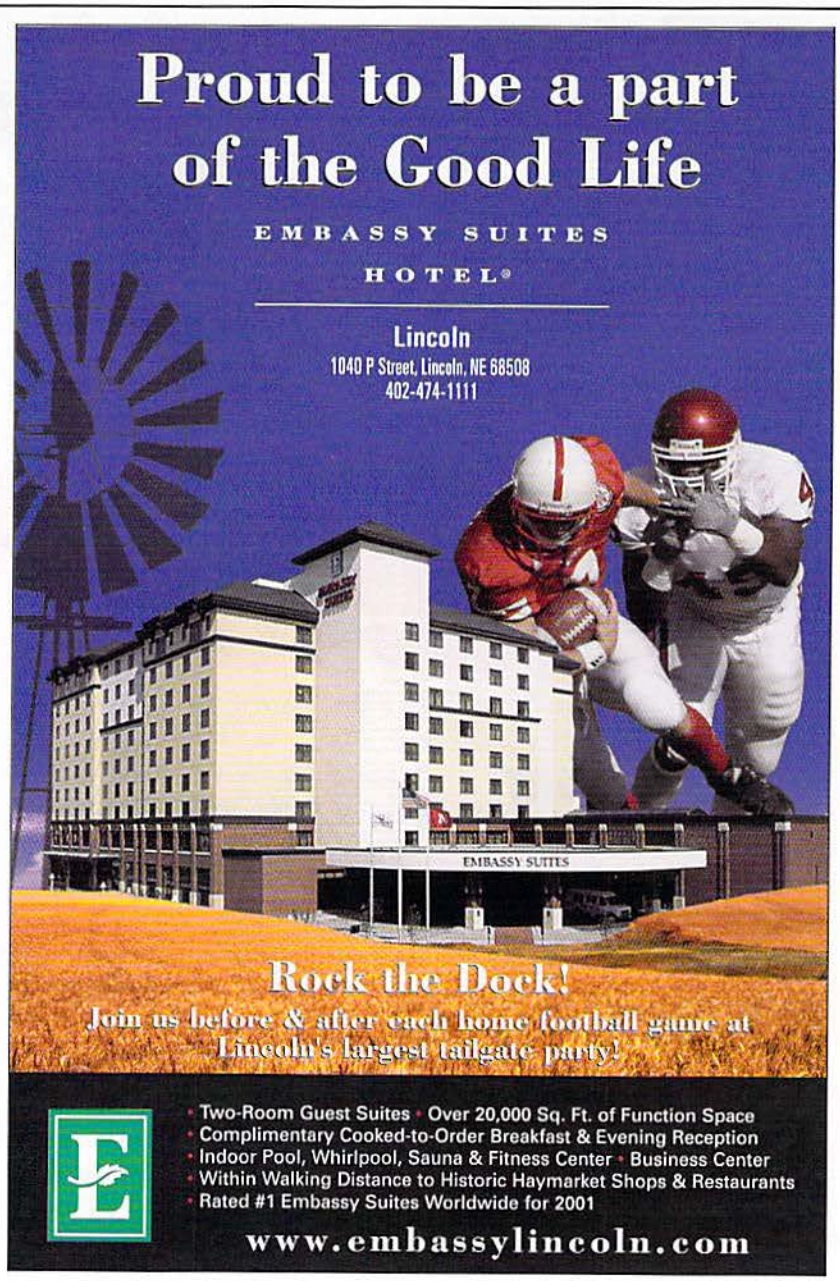
"That approach will still be there. (But) you can line up in different formations, you can line up in different positions on the defensive side of it and make it work," he said.

"You make decisions whether or not they are easy ones. Regardless of the relationships, the decisions have to be made that are in the best interests of the program."
— Frank Solich

After issuing a brief statement in front of television cameras outside the South Stadium, Solich agreed to answer questions in the auditorium, with the cameras turned off.

He didn't want to address the issue in a press conference setting.

"The main issue here is the coaches that are no longer going to be in the program," he said. ■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Bill Byrne congratulates former Nebraska center Dominic Raiola during a ceremony to retire Raiola's jersey earlier this year (above) and hands the Big 12 volleyball championship trophy to Greichaly Cepero (right).

Heading

Texas A&M sought Byrne's opinion, then asked if he'd be interested in job

Bill Byrne left his South Stadium office in the late afternoon on the Monday following the Colorado football game. Not long before, the sports information office issued a release indicating that football assistants Craig Bohl, George Darlington and Nelson Barnes had been fired.

A group of reporters met Byrne just outside the double doors leading to the parking lot.

"I thought I'd just explain a little bit about how we go about making coaching changes at the University of Nebraska, as far as policy," Byrne said. "Our policy is that the athletic director hires the head coach and the head coaches hire the assistant coaches. They also terminate them.

"We've made some changes today that we think are in the best interests of the University of Nebraska, and I want you to know that I support Frank Solich completely on those and that we need to turn this program around, and we're going to. That's all I have to say. Thank you."

As always, Byrne's statement was succinct, allowing for little confusion as to its meaning. In this case, however, it also was inaccurate in his use of the collective pronoun "we."

Though the official announcement wouldn't come until the next day, after what Byrne described as much consideration, Nebraska's athletic director of 11 years was headed to Texas A&M, where he would replace Wally Groff, whom Robert Gates,

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South

A&M's new president, asked to resign in August.

Groff had spent 10 years at A&M, arriving soon after Byrne came to Nebraska.

Initially, A&M had sought Byrne's advice on possible candidates to replace Groff. The school subsequently called back to ask if it could discuss the position with him.

"They came after me," Byrne told the Omaha World-Herald.

Three days before the Colorado game, Byrne, his wife Marilyn and Chuck Neinas, a former Big Eight commissioner who now has a consulting business related to the hiring of athletic directors and coaches, took a private jet to College Station, Texas to talk with A&M, the World-Herald reported.

A week later, at a hastily called news conference on the media level of the skybox addition at Memorial Stadium, Byrne announced he had accepted the job. The venue was appropriate, considering the $36.1 million skybox project was among the highlights of Byrne's tenure.

Under his watch, Nebraska spent more than $70 million on facility improvements.

In addition to the improvements that dramatically altered the look of Memorial Stadium, the university participated in a joint venture with the City of Lincoln and Lincoln Professional Baseball to build a $29.5 million baseball-softball complex at Haymarket Park.

The athletic department also spent $7.9 million on improvements on the basketball arena at the Bob Devaney Sports Center and $4.9 million to up-grade track and field facilities.

The Sports Center's hydraulic, banked indoor track is one of only seven in the world.

Byrne's building efforts earned him the John L. Toner Award for

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Bill Byrne announced at a hastily called news conference Dec. 3 that he was leaving after 11 years at Nebraska to become athletic director at Texas A&M

"It looked like a great opportunity to build the same type of program we have here at Nebraska. I like to build things. As our staff will tell you, if I do one thing well, it's build cohesiveness and build buildings."

— Bill Byrne

2002. An athletic director earns the annual award based on overall accomplishments, with particular emphasis on football.

Byrne ranked in the lower half among Big 12 athletic directors in annual salary at Nebraska, a $169,472 base with a $60,000 endowment. But that wasn't the only issue.

"He wants to build another program, and frankly, that one needs more building than ours at this point," Nebraska Chancellor Harvey Perlman said during the news conference.

Byrne arrived at Nebraska in late June of 1992, replacing the retired Bob Devaney, and immediately set about doing what needed to be done for an athletic department with a $2.5 million deficit.

A decade later, that red has turned to black, with donations quadrupling to nearly $11 million annually and the department budget nearly tripling, to $44.5 million annually.

Nebraska sponsors varsity teams in 23 men's and women's sports, the most in the Big 12. Women's programs in soccer, bowling and rifle have been added under Byrne's direction. Budgetary considerations, coupled with allegations of NCAA violations, led to the elimination of the men's swimming and diving program in 2001, evidence of his willingness to make unpopular but necessary decisions.

Byrne hired 15 head coaches and fired three, women's gymnastics coach Rick Walton in 1994, baseball coach John Sanders in 1997 and men's basketball coach Danny Nee is 2000.

He hired Dave Van Horn from Northwestern State to replace Sanders, Barry Collier from Butler to replace Nee and Dan Kendig, a former Nebraska assistant, from Cornell to replace Walton.

A nationwide search for Byrne's successor began immediately. The job vacancy was posted on the day after the announcement, with a closing date for applications of Jan. 6, 2003.

Former Cornhusker football coach Tom Osborne, recently re-elected to a second term in the U.S. House of Representatives, indicated that he wouldn't be a candidate for the position.

Nebraska senior athletic directors Joe Selig and Bob Burton both said they were interested.

Steve Pederson, the athletic director at the University of Pittsburgh, also was considered a candidate, although initially he declined to address the matter, whether or not he might be interested.

Pederson, a Nebraska native, worked with Byrne at Nebraska, as well as being the Cornhuskers' football recruiting coordinator and serving as Osborne's administrative assistant.

The most remarkable thing about working at Nebraska "is what happens every Saturday afternoon in the fall when 78,000 fans show up in Lincoln," Byrne said. "It's a place like no other."

He'll experience the atmosphere again next fall, when Texas A&M comes to Lincoln on Oct. 18. It will be Nebraska's Homecoming game. ■

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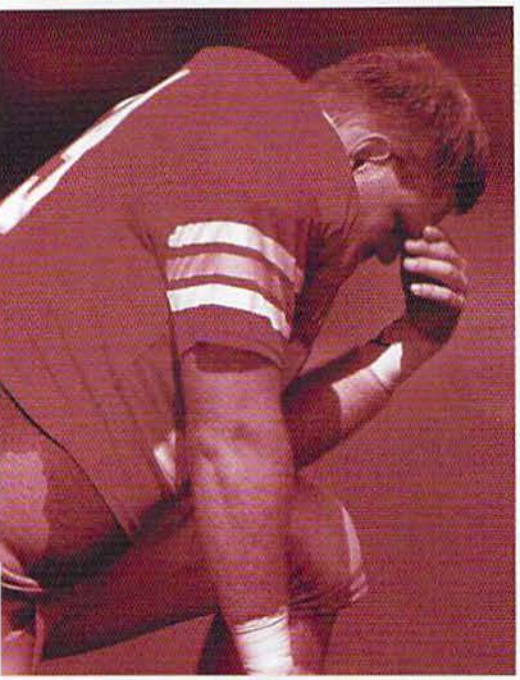

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'The Wheels

Although coaches, players denied a carryover effect, the problems began at the end of last season

By Mike Babcock

Josh Brown summed up the season following Nebraska's 49-13 loss at Kansas State. "If you would have told me we were going to be like this at the beginning of the season, I would have asked you if you had run into a well or were on drugs," he said, "because this is not supposed to happen."

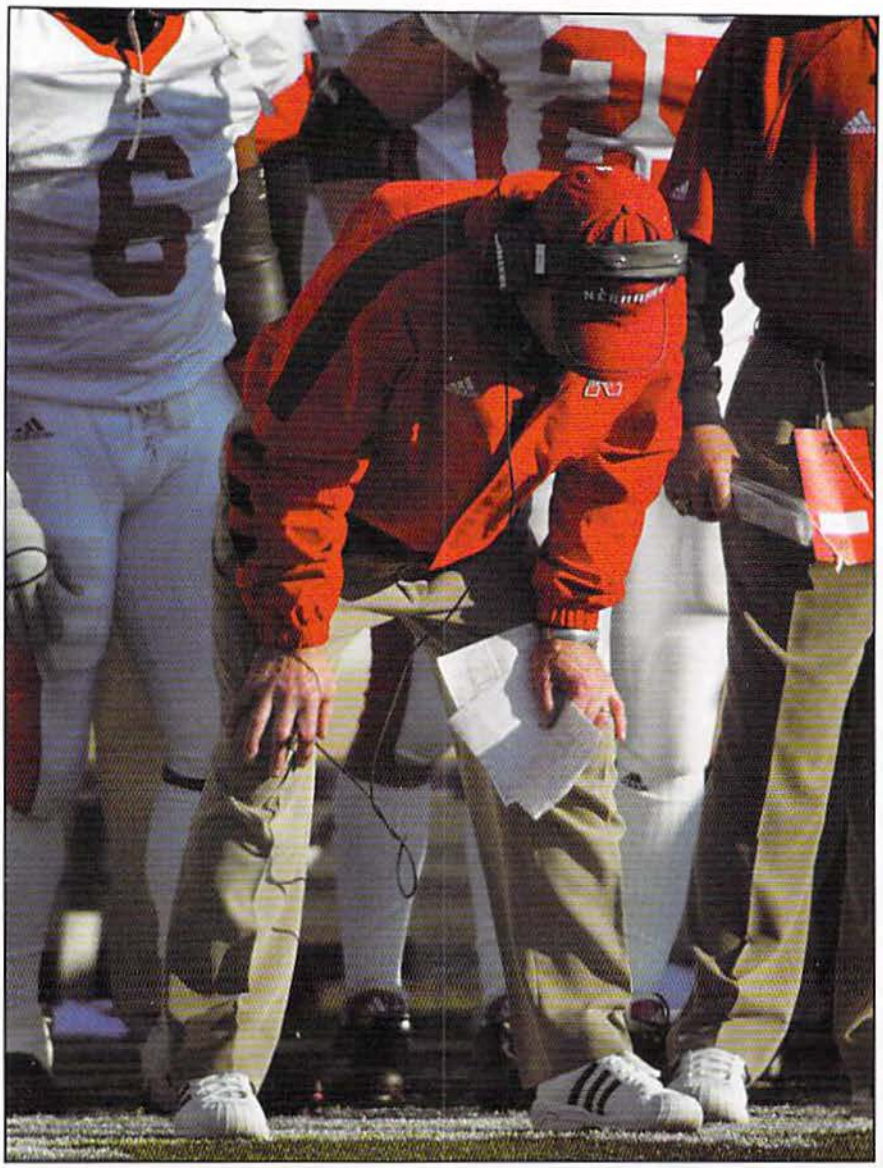
Never mind that the Cornhuskers had yet to play Colorado, or that Brown, a senior place-kicker, would be suspended for that game after being ticketed for driving under the influence.

In fact, his suspension was just one more inexplicable glitch in a season the likes of which Nebraska has not endured since 1961, when Coach Bill Jennings' final team finished with a 3-6-1 record.

Those Cornhuskers got off to a 2-0-1 start, scoring 71 points in the first three games. But they would score only 48 points, total, the rest of the way. Their offensive ineptitude was such that they didn't pick up a first down in a 7-0 loss against Colorado before 28,108 at Memorial Stadium.

The 1961 season would have been best left to the history books.

Granted, Nebraska won't finish with a losing record this season. And the Cornhuskers will be playing in a 34th consecutive bowl game, something that had occurred only twice in school history in 1961. But taken in the context of what has happened since then this season has been a disaster.



Scott Bruhn

Frank Solich said his fifth season as head coach was as tough of a year as he's had in the coaching profession.

— The Cornhuskers hadn't lost six games in a season since 1961.

— They hadn't failed to win at least nine games since 1968.

— They hadn't had a losing record in conference play since 1968.

— They dropped out of the Associated Press Top 25, after 348 consecutive weeks, following the Iowa State loss, and they will finish out of the Top 25 for the first time since 1968.

— And three assistant coaches, all of them on defense, were fired, an enforced restructuring last experienced after the 1961 season, when Bob Devaney replaced Jennings. In the wake of the 28-13 loss against Colorado, Craig Bohl, George Darlington and Nelson Barnes were fired.

What it all adds up to is "as tough of a year as I've had in the coaching profession," fifth-year Coach Frank Solich said. "It's been tough on our players. It's been tough on our staff.

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Fell Off'

"This is definitely a difficult time for everyone that's involved, especially those guys that are no longer with the program. But also it's difficult for those that are still in the program."

Although coaches and players alike have denied a carryover effect, the Cornhuskers' problems, particularly on defense, began at the end of last season, with a 62-36 loss at Colorado. That was followed by a 37-14 loss against national champion Miami in the Rose Bowl game.

Though the Miami loss was no disgrace, it aggravated the defensive concerns, as allowing a combined 99 points and 1,054 yards of total offense in two games certainly would.

Those two games were like no others in recent memory.

"If you go through the course of my career here, things worked pretty well until the last two games. The wheels fell off at that point in time," said Solich. "In trying to evaluate that, there were a combination of reasons that caused us probably not to be successful . . . injuries were a factor.

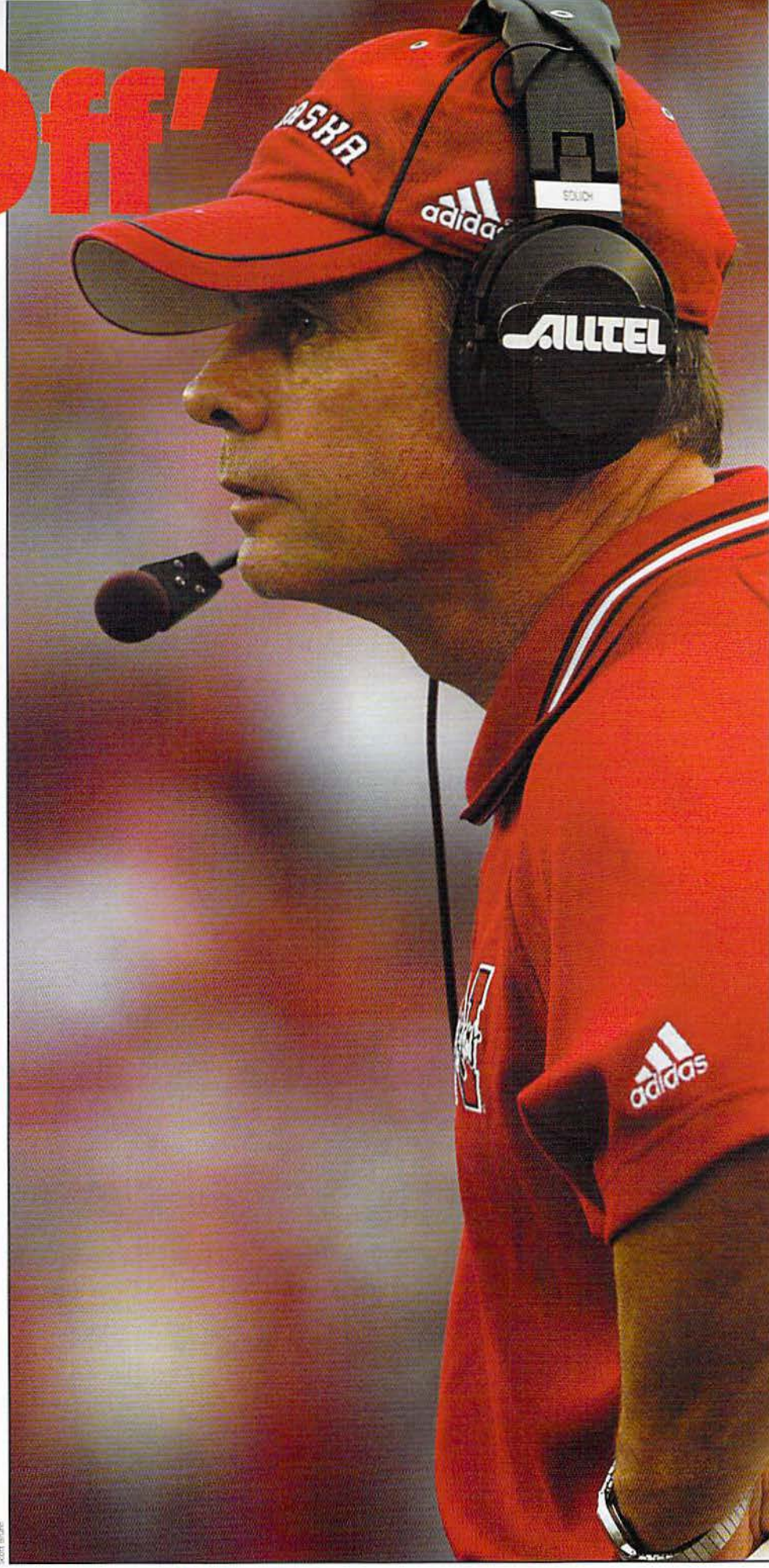
"We were not the same team at the end of the year that we were in the middle of the year, as we approached the stretch drive there and attempted to go undefeated."

The Colorado game, in particular, weighed heavily on players' minds. "I don't think people are obsessed about it," middle linebacker Barrett Ruud said before this season's Colorado game. "But I think it's definitely the type of game where at the start of the season you highlight that game.

"It's kind of an off-season thing. People think about it a little bit."

Immediately after the Rose Bowl loss, the players showed a determination and resolve to work in the off-season to regain the respect the program had, they thought, only temporarily lost.

One significant factor in what would happen in 2002 was All-America offensive guard Toniu Fonoti's decision to skip his senior season and move on to the National Football League.



Scott Bruhn

Fonoti would have stabilized an inexperienced line. Still, his departure wasn't a great surprise. Change is the nature of college athletics, and Nebraska prepared to move on.

The departure of Eric Crouch also had a significant impact, of course. The only difference was, the Heisman Trophy winner had exhausted his eligibility, as well as opposing defenses.

Of lesser concern, but significant nonetheless, true freshman Manaia Brown, a rising star in the defensive line, announced after the Rose Bowl game that he was transferring.

Despite such losses, "spring ball was very encouraging," Solich said. "There was certainly a lot of hope coming out of spring ball that this would be the kind of team we all wanted it to be.

"But that did not work. It did not play out to be that way."

Not everything that happened during the spring was positive, however. Midway through, Solich announced that weakside linebacker Randy Stella would not be reinstated following a suspension, for unspecified reasons, that kept him on the sideline during the 2001 season.

Also, defensive back Willie Amos, the team's fastest player, suffered a knee injury in the final major scrimmage prior to the spring game that would sideline him this season.

Starting nose tackle Jason Lohr would join Amos on the sideline, after reinjuring the knee he first injured against Notre Dame in the third game of the 2001 season during two-a-days.

Sports Illustrated predicted the Cornhuskers' slide. In a May 2002 issue, the magazine noted that "spirits are low" in the aftermath of the 2001 season and "talent is ebbing, too."

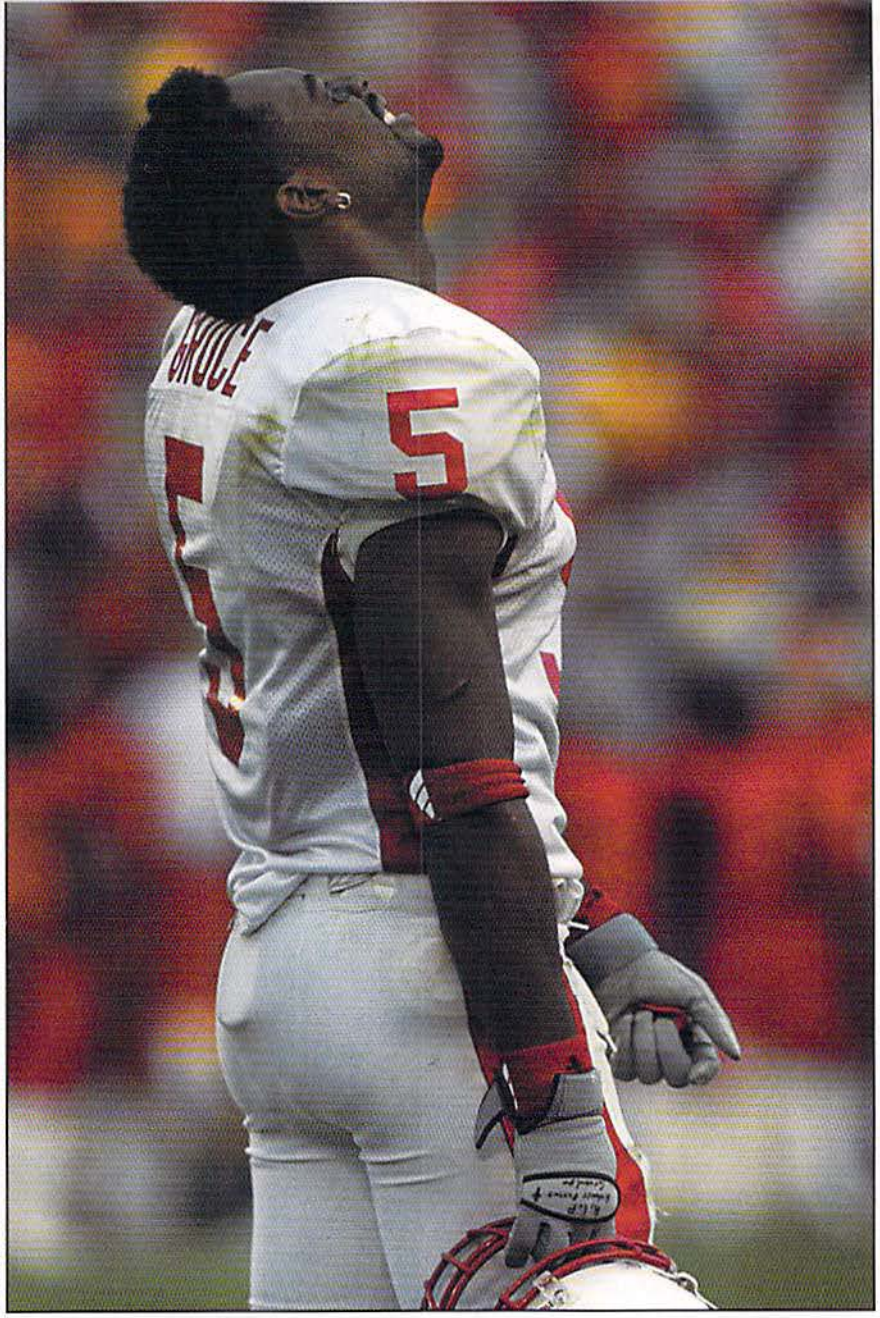
The Cornhuskers bristled at such predictions of doom and gloom. "I've got to shake my head when I hear people say that about this program," senior strongside linebacker Scott Shanle said.

Many suggested that 2002 would be a "crossroads" season for Nebraska.

"As we've always said, the expectations are huge," said Solich.

That was reflected, to some degree, in the pre-season polls. The Cornhuskers were ranked No. 10 in the Associated Press poll and No. 8 in the EPSN/USA Today coaches' poll.

Big 12 area media predicted a second-place finish in the North Division, however.



Scott Bruhn

DeJuan Groce has a pained look (above) during Nebraska's second straight loss Sept. 28 at Iowa State. Jammal Lord is consoled by teammate Wilson Thomas (right) after a heartbreaking loss to Texas.

Nebraska, wearing redesigned uniforms that had traditionalists uncomfortable, started its climb with home victories against Arizona State, Troy State and Utah State, moving up to No. 8 in the AP poll and No. 7 in the coaches' poll. The victories seemed Cornhusker-typical, nothing out of the ordinary.

Then came back-to-back road games, at Penn State and, after a week off, at Iowa State. In the May issue, Sports Illustrated had predicted the Penn State game would be among the season's 10 best. The "Cornhuskers will leave fans in Happy Valley with little cheer," the magazine said.

As it turned out, Nittany Lion fans had a lot to cheer in the 40-7 victory. "As tough as it will be to put it behind them, they'll have to do it," Solich said of his players afterward.

If the Cornhuskers did set the loss aside, it wasn't apparent. With Seneca Wallace passing for 220 yards and one touchdown and rushing for another, Iowa State won 36-14. The wheels that Solich said had dropped off at the end of the 2001 season were wobbling, if not falling off again.

Nebraska dropped out of both polls, and was never close to returning.

The Cornhuskers got back on track against McNeese State, with Jammal Lord, Crouch's successor, breaking the school single-game record for

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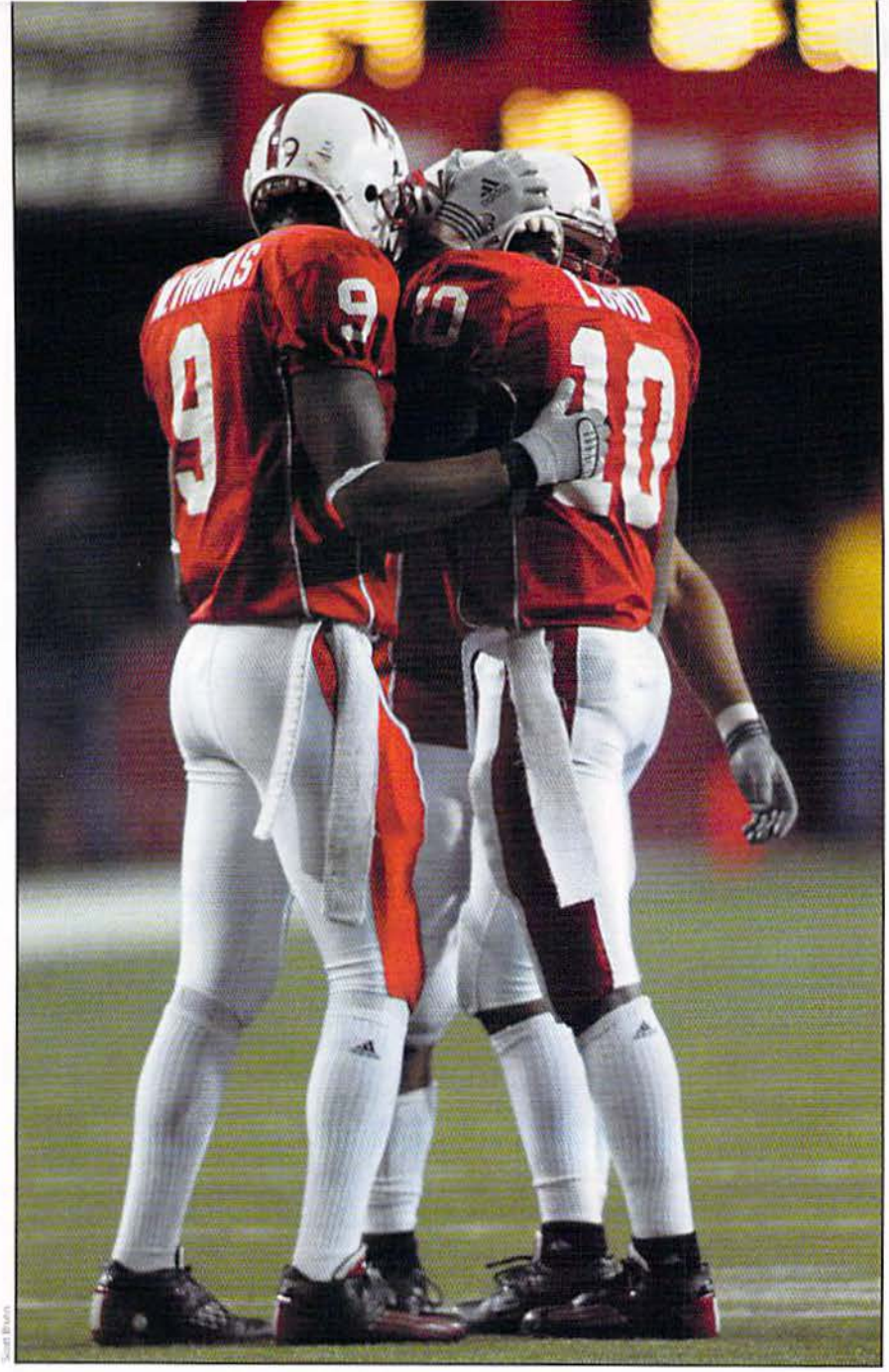

total offense with 369 yards, 218 of them rushing.

Early in the game, rush end Chris Kelsay, a pre-season all-conference and All-America candidate, would suffer a partially torn hamstring that would sideline him until the Kansas State game.

The next week, Nebraska limited Missouri to 28 yards in the second half of a 24-13 victory. DeJuan Groce returned a punt 89 yards for a touchdown, his third score on a punt return of the season.

The Missouri game was the last in which I-back Thunder Collins would play. Solich suspended Collins after the opener and then extended the suspension three more games. Collins returned for the McNeese State game, but after seeing only limited mop-up duty, left the team.

Collins was expected to provide a one-two punch at I-back, joining Dahrran Diedrick, who had led the conference in rushing in 2001, with 1,299 yards and 15 touchdowns.

Despite his numbers, however, Diedrick never had the increased opportunity most expected. He averaged only 13 carries per game and didn't rush for 100 yards until the Kansas game.

The Cornhuskers went to Stillwater, Okla., with a 5-2 record and renewed hope. But Tatum Bell, Oklahoma State's second-string tailback, rushed for 182 yards, and a 7-3 halftime lead gave way to the frustration of a 24-21 defeat, Nebraska's first against the Cowboys in 41 seasons.

"We just start getting our momentum back and then something happens where we lose it again," Ruud said looking back, late in the season. "We always go in thinking we're going to get it going, we're going to start playing better, and then we make one or two little mistakes in those games."

The Cornhuskers made a dramatic comeback to win at Texas A&M 38-31, after trailing 31-14 in the third quarter, and they battled Texas to a standoff at Memorial Stadium before losing 27-24. A Nathan Vashar interception near the goal line with 10 seconds remaining sealed the Longhorn victory.

Still, another nine-win season was within the Cornhuskers' grasp. In fact, by winning their final three games, they could have ended up in the Big 12 championship game.

That possibility was dashed the week after a 45-7 victory against Kansas. With quarterback Ell Roberson rushing for 228 yards and three touchdowns, Kansas State pummeled them. Afterward, senior center and co-captain John Garrison questioned the Cornhuskers' heart.

"It's disappointing," he said. "It's not Nebraska football."

They played with heart against Colorado, but couldn't make a 10-7 halftime lead hold up.

Three days later, the sports information office issued a release announcing that Bohl, Darlington and Barnes had been fired and that Solich was giving up the offensive coordinator's responsibilities.

Late that afternoon, after Solich had met with the players to explain what was happening, senior defensive tackle Jon Clanton talked to reporters as he left the South Stadium.

The meeting was "real sad, a thing you're not used to," he said. "Obviously, it hurts."

After the Colorado game, Bohl, the defensive coordinator, shook players' hands, as he always did.

"He'll be missed here," said Clanton. "I'd like to see him now, give him a hug."

Despite the hurt, Clanton was optimistic about the program's future. "Next year it's going to be a totally different team," he said. "Nebraska is going to bounce back next year, I guarantee."

That's how it is supposed to happen at Nebraska. ■

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2002 Results

1	Aug. 24	Arizona State (8-5), W 48-10	1-0
2	Aug. 31	Troy State (4-8), W 31-16	2-0
3	Sept. 7	Utah State (4-7), W 44-13	3-0
4	Sept. 14	@ Penn State (9-3), L 40-7	3-1
5	Sept. 28	@ Iowa State (7-6), L 36-14	3-2
6	Oct. 5	McNeese St. (11-1), W 38-14	4-2
7	Oct. 12	Missouri (5-7), W 24-13	5-2
8	Oct. 19	@ Oklahoma St. (7-5), L 24-21	5-3
9	Oct. 26	@ Texas A&M (6-6), W 38-31	6-3
10	Nov. 2	Texas (10-2), L 27-24	6-4
11	Nov. 9	Kansas (2-10), W 45-7	7-4
12	Nov. 16	@ Kansas St. (10-2), L 49-13	7-5
13	Nov. 29	Colorado (9-4), L 28-13	7-6
14	Dec. 27	Mississippi (6-6), 3:30 p.m. (ESPN), Independence Bowl	

Big 12 Conference at a Glance

North	Conf.		All	
Colorado	7	1	9	4
Kansas State	6	2	10	2
Iowa State	4	4	7	6
Nebraska	3	5	7	6
Missouri	2	6	5	7
Kansas	0	8	2	10
South	**Conf.**		**All**	
Oklahoma	6	2	11	2
Texas	6	2	10	2
Texas Tech	5	3	8	5
Oklahoma State	5	3	7	5
Texas A&M	3	5	6	6
Baylor	1	7	3	9

Saturday, Dec. 7
Big 12 Championship, Houston
Oklahoma 29, Colorado 7

BOWL SCHEDULE
(All Times Central)

Monday, Dec. 23
Tangerine Bowl, Orlando, Fla.
Clemson vs. Texas Tech , 4:30 p.m. (ESPN)

Friday, Dec. 27
Houston Bowl, Houston, Texas
Southern Miss vs. Oklahoma State, noon (ESPN)

Independence Bowl, Shreveport, La.
Nebraska vs. Mississippi , 3:30 p.m. (ESPN)

Holiday Bowl, San Diego, Calif.
Kansas State vs. Arizona State, 7 p.m. (ESPN)

Saturday, Dec. 28
Alamo Bowl, San Antonio, Texas
Colorado vs. Wisconsin, 7 p.m. (ESPN)

Tuesday, Dec. 31
Humanitarian Bowl, Boise, Idaho
Iowa State vs. Boise State, 11 a.m. (ESPN)

Wednesday, Jan.1
Cotton Bowl, Dallas, Texas
Texas vs. LSU, 10 a.m. (FOX)

Rose Bowl, Pasadena, Calif.
Oklahoma vs. Washington State, 4 p.m. (ABC)

Game 14

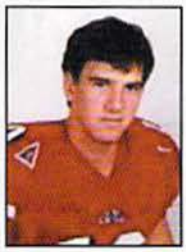
Mississippi
Dec. 27

Location: Oxford, Miss.
Enrollment: 14,500
2002 record: 6-6
Coach: David Cutcliffe, 4th season
Series: First meeting

3:30 p.m. (CST), ESPN
Independence Stadium, Shreveport., La.

Rebel to Watch

Junior quarterback Eli Manning has passed for 3,088 yards this season, breaking his own school record, and 6,206 for his career. He has passed for 20 touchdowns this season and 51 in his career, also a school record. The 6-foot-5, 218-pounder has broken a number of school records that were either held by his father Archie, who played at Old Miss from 1968-1970, or were at one time.



Quick Facts

David Cutcliffe is 29-19 in his fourth season as head coach after 17 years as an assistant at Tennessee. He was the offensive coordinator when Eli Manning's brother Peyton and the Vols lost to Nebraska in the Orange Bowl on Jan. 2, 1998.

Ole Miss is making its fifth appearance in the Independence Bowl. The Rebels defeated Oklahoma 27-25 in their last trip to Shreveport, on a 39-yard field goal by Les Binkley as time expired in 1999.

Senior middle linebacker Eddie Strong and senior strong safety Matt Grier were first-team All-SEC selections. Senior center Ben Claxton was a second-team selection.

2002 Results

Mississippi (6-6)	
Aug. 31	Louisiana-Monroe, W 31-3
Sept. 7	Memphis, W 38-16
Sept. 14	@ Texas Tech, L 42-28
Sept. 21	Vanderbilt, W 45-38
Oct. 5	Florida, W 17-14
Oct. 12	Arkansas State, W 52-17
Oct. 19	@ Alabama, L 42-7
Oct. 26	@ Arkansas, L 48-28
Nov. 2	Auburn, L 31-24
Nov. 9	@ Georgia, L 31-17
Nov. 23	@ LSU, L 14-13
Nov. 28	Mississippi St., W 24-12

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Tentative 2 Deeps

Nebraska Offense

SE	9	Wilson Thomas***	6-6	215	Sr.
	2	Ross Pilkington	6-0	195	Fr.
LT	51	Richie Incognito	6-3	295	RFr.
	69	Nick Povendo	6-3	300	So.
LG	78	Mike Erickson*	6-4	295	So.
	55	Junior Tagoa'i*	6-2	295	Jr.
C	52	John Garrison***	6-4	290	Sr.
	79	Josh Sewell	6-2	300	Jr.
RG	59	Wes Cody**	6-2	305	Sr.
	55	Junior Tagoa'i*	6-2	295	Jr.
RT	68	Dan Vili Waldrop**	6-5	315	Jr.
	69	Nick Povendo	6-3	300	So.
TE	99	Aaron Golliday***	6-4	290	Sr.
	42	Matt Herian	6-4	215	Fr.
QB	10	Jammal Lord**	6-2	210	Jr.
	16	Mike Stuntz*	6-1	200	So.
FB	4	Judd Davies**	6-0	255	Jr.
	45	Steve Kriewald*	5-10	255	So.
IB	30	Dahrran Diedrick***	6-0	225	Sr.
	5	David Horne	6-0	190	Fr.
WB	89	Troy Hassebroek***	6-4	215	Sr.
	81	Ben Cornelsen**	5-10	190	Sr.
PK	26	Josh Brown***	6-2	190	Sr.

Nebraska Defense

LR	57	Chris Kelsay***	6-5	255	Sr.
or	88	Trevor Johnson**	6-4	250	Jr.
NT	59	Ryon Bingham*	6-3	280	Jr.
	55	Jon Clanton***	6-2	285	Sr.
DT	94	Patrick Kabongo**	6-6	305	Jr.
	66	Le Kevin Smith	6-2	300	RFr.
RR	98	Demoine Adams***	6-2	260	Sr.
or	88	Trevor Johnson**	6-4	250	Jr.
SLB	43	Scott Shanle***	6-2	240	Sr.
	47	Ira Cooper*	6-2	220	So.
MLB	38	Barrett Ruud*	6-2	240	So.
	42	Steve Safranek*	6-2	245	Jr.
WLB	17	T.J. Hollowell**	6-0	220	Jr.
or	7	Demorrio Williams	6-1	205	Jr.
LCB	3	Fabian Washington	6-0	175	Fr.
	28	Pat Ricketts**	5-11	180	Jr.
FS	20	Josh Bullocks	6-1	195	RFr.
or	21	Philip Bland*	5-11	205	So.
ROV	21	Philip Bland*	5-11	205	So.
	2	Aaron Terpening***	5-11	195	Sr.
RCB	5	DeJuan Groce***	5-10	190	Sr.
	1	Lornell McPherson*	5-9	175	So.
P	19	Kyle Larson	6-0	195	Jr.

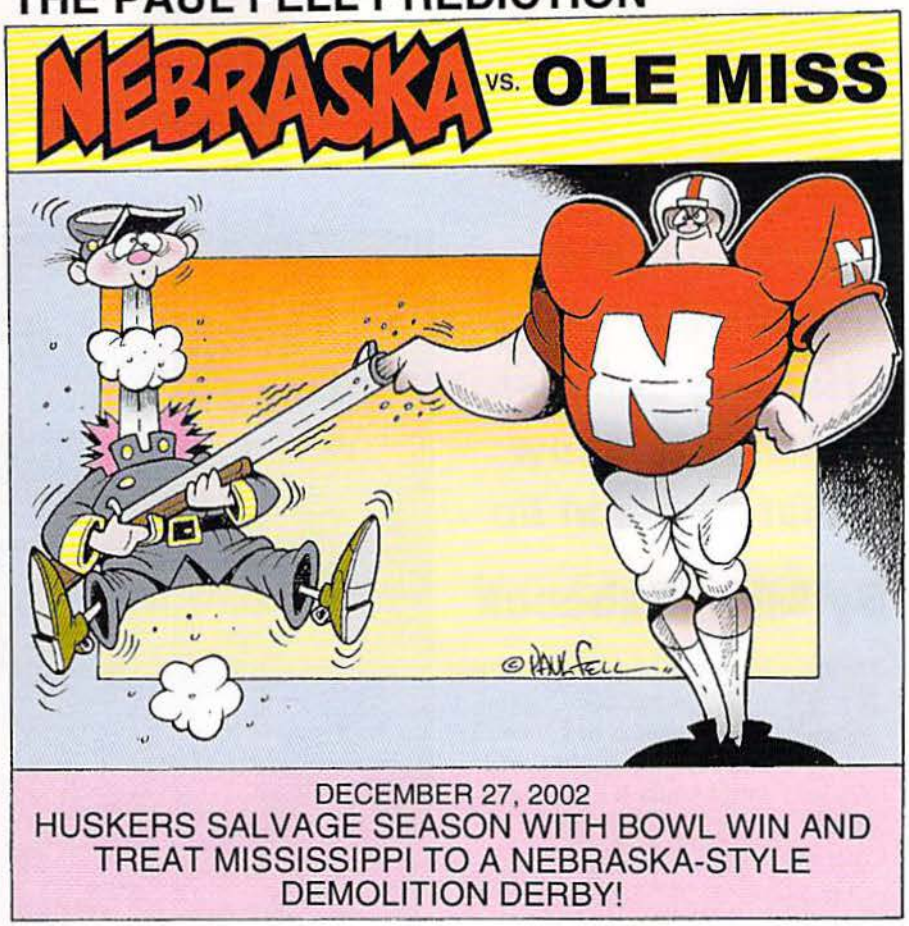
Ole Miss Offense

SE	84	Bill Flowers*	6-0	193	So.
	8	Chris Collins**	6-2	190	Jr.
LT	70	Tre' Stallings	6-4	317	RFr.
	75	Bobby Harris	6-4	315	RFr.
LG	62	Doug Buckles*	6-5	307	So.
	53	Justin Sawyer**	6-3	305	Jr.
C	55	Ben Claxton***	6-3	302	Sr.
	53	Justin Sawyer**	6-3	305	Jr.
RG	76	Marcus Johnson*	6-6	320	So.
	73	Chris Spencer	6-4	312	RFr.
RT	58	Belton Johnson***	6-5	304	Sr.
	74	Cliff Woodruff**	6-6	301	Jr.
TE	80	Eric Rice*	6-3	230	So.
	90	Justin Sawyer**	6-3	305	Jr.
QB	10	Eli Manning**	6-5	218	Jr.
	15	David Morris***	6-1	185	Sr.
RB	47	Tremaine Turner**	5-10	200	Jr.
	5	Ronald McClendon	5-9	190	Jr.
FB	42	Rick Razzano*	5-11	240	So.
	6	Toward Sanford***	5-10	220	Sr.
FL	9	Jason Armstead*	5-10	160	Sr.
	11	Mike Espy	6-0	187	RFr.
K	86	Jonathan Nichols*	6-0	180	So.

Ole Miss Defense

LE	99	Josh Cooper**	6-4	245	Jr.
	77	Jayme Mitchell	6-6	265	Fr.
LT	98	Yahrek Johnson***	6-2	270	Sr.
	68	McKinley Boykin	6-2	285	RFr.
N	95	Jesse Mitchell**	6-1	277	Jr.
	61	Daniel Booth*	6-4	281	So.
RE	85	Charlie Anderson**	6-4	235	Jr.
	56	Germaine Landrum*	5-3	235	Sr.
MLB	1	Eddie Strong***	6-4	245	Sr.
	48	L.P. Spence*	6-3	220	Jr.
SLB	51	Justin Wade**	6-3	225	Jr.
	33	Ryan Hamilton***	6-2	230	Sr.
LCB	6	Von Hutchins**	5-11	184	Jr.
	31	Desmon Johnson***	5-10	160	Sr.
SS	44	Matt Grier*	6-1	190	Sr.
	39	Kelvin Robinson	6-1	210	RFr.
FS	26	Eric Oliver*	6-2	210	So.
	30	Tavarus Horne*	6-0	203	So.
WS	13	Travis Blanchard**	5-11	185	Jr.
	17	Wes Scott**	6-1	200	Jr.
RCB	25	Travis Johnson	6-1	191	RFr.
	22	Chris Knight*	5-11	172	Sr.
P	97	Cody Ridgeway*	6-1	190	So.

THE PAUL FELL PREDICTION



DECEMBER 27, 2002
HUSKERS SALVAGE SEASON WITH BOWL WIN AND TREAT MISSISSIPPI TO A NEBRASKA-STYLE DEMOLITION DERBY!

PICKS

NEBRASKA VS MISSISSIPPI

Brian Hill
Editor

After a crazy season and a coaching shake-up, this game could go a lot of ways. If Nebraska plays up to its potential, it certainly should win, but this team has been a hard one to read. A win here could be a much-needed boost heading into 2003. **Nebraska 37, Mississippi 24**

Mike Babcock
Contributing Editor

With all the distractions during bowl preparations, the Cornhuskers will be hard-pressed to finish on a positive note. The good thing is, Mississippi hasn't had to defend against a run-oriented team on a weekly basis, plus the Rebels don't have much of a running game themselves. If Nebraska can control the ball, keep it out of Eli Manning's hands, it can win. If the mistakes and penalties continue, the Cornhuskers could be in for trouble. **Nebraska 24, Mississippi 23**

Terry Douglass
Grand Island Independent
Sports Editor

A disappointing season will end on a high note for a Nebraska team determined to finish above .500. Ole Miss and star quarterback Eli Manning simply do not possess the running game or the defense needed to beat the Cornhuskers. **Nebraska 42, Mississippi 21**

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'Busin

Bowl game vs. Mississippi gives Huskers one last chance to show what they can do

By Mike Babcock

David Horne wanted to play in a bowl game "somewhere it's hot," Nebraska's freshman I-back said with a smile at a news conference on the Monday before the Colorado game.

He probably won't get his wish when the Cornhuskers try to finish a frustrating season on a positive note against Mississippi in the MainStay Independence Bowl on Dec. 27.

It won't be hot but it might be warm in Shreveport, La., home of the bowl. Or it might be the way it was two years ago, when Mississippi State defeated Texas A&M 43-41 in overtime.

Snow began falling before the game, piling up 6 inches by the end.

Nebraska occasionally has endured cool and inclement weather during its string of 33 bowl games, though never snow — and the odds are against that this season.

Snow isn't that common in northwestern Louisiana. Even if it were, however, Horne and the Cornhuskers would be in no position to complain about the weather.

"We feel good about being able to keep Nebraska's bowl string alive," Coach Frank Solich said in announcing that the Cornhuskers had accepted a bid from the Independence Bowl.

"I know the players are looking forward to playing another game."

This will be Nebraska's first trip to the bowl, which is seven years younger than the Cornhuskers' continuing streak. McNeese State and Tulsa met in the first Independence Bowl game in mid-December of 1976, two weeks before Nebraska defeated Texas Tech in the Astro-Bluebonnet Bowl.

In any case, "we feel good about the way Big 12 teams have been treated down there," said Solich. "We've got nothing but great response from coaches I've visited with in terms of how people at the Independence Bowl conduct their bowl and what they try to do for the teams there."

But even that isn't a particularly

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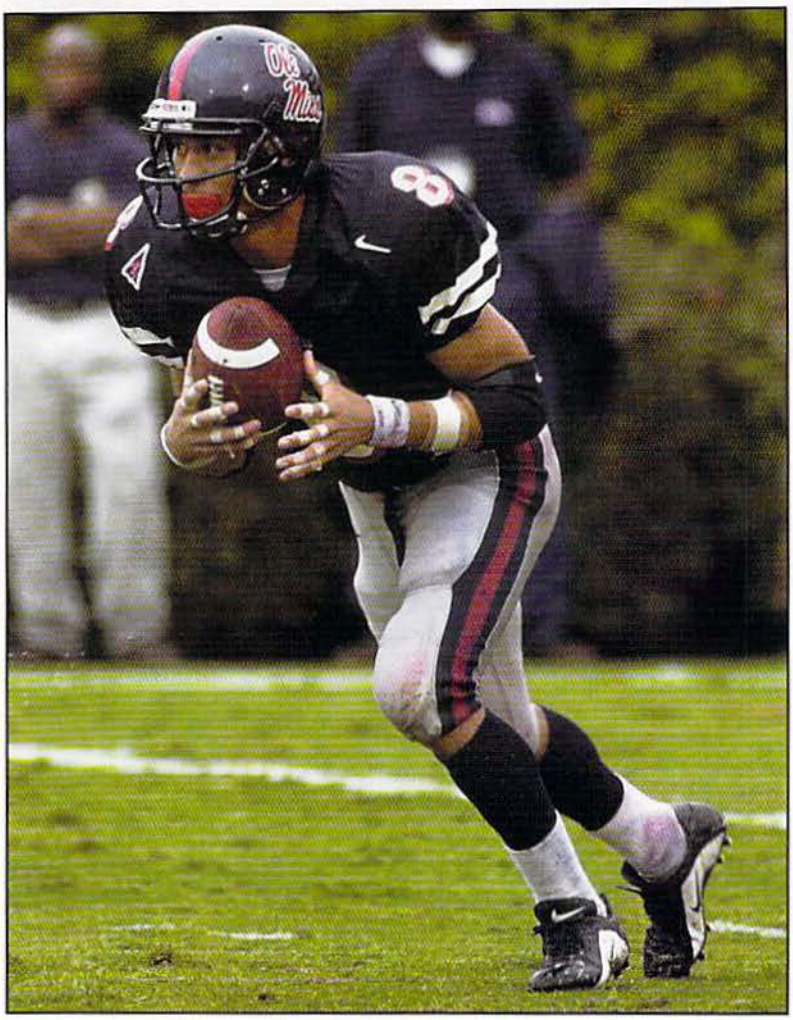
ness Trip'



Rebel Air Attack Challenge for Huskers

The Mississippi offense is built around the passing of junior quarterback Eli Manning (left), who has completed 254-of-437 for 3,088 yards and 20 touchdowns. His favorite targets are Chris Collins (above left), who has 49 catches for 754 yards and 10 touchdowns, and Bill Flowers (above right), who has 47 receptions for 512 yards and three touchdowns. Manning is the son of Archie Manning, one of the greatest players in Ole Miss history, and the brother of Indianapolis Colt quarterback and former Tennessee standout Peyton Manning.

University of Mississippi photos

significant consideration for a program whose concern at this point is simply playing well enough to win. "It'll be a business trip for these players," Solich said.

"We want to finish this off so we can show we're the type of team that represents this program with great effort and with great execution. This bowl will give us an opportunity to do that."

The 6-6 Mississippi team standing in the way of that opportunity needed to defeat rival Mississippi State 24-12 in the final game of the regular season in order to be bowl eligible.

Mississippi has played in the Independence Bowl four times, winning three.

"So it's kind of like home for them," Solich said.

The Rebels won five of their first six games this season, including a 17-14 upset of then-No. 6-ranked Florida, before losing five consecutive Southeastern Conference games.

"They started off well, and they

ended well," said Solich.

Five days before the Mississippi State game, Coach David Cutcliffe's team lost to then No. 21-ranked Louisiana State 14-13.

The Rebel offense is built around the passing of junior quarterback Eli Manning, who has completed 254-of-437 (58.1 percent) for 3,088 yards and 20 touchdowns, with 15 interceptions.

Ronald McClendon, a transfer from Butler County, Kan., Community College whom Nebraska recruited, is the leading rusher, with 342 yards on only 84 carries.

"They've got good personnel," Solich said.

His primary concern, however, is his own players, who have endured more losses than any season since 1961 and are preparing for the bowl game under a stop-gap staff, following the post-Colorado firing of defensive assistants Craig Bohl, George Darlington and Nelson Barnes.

Even though he must divide his attention between replacing assistants and restructuring the staff, recruiting and preparing for Mississippi, "I share the players' excitement about having an opportunity to play another game," said Solich. "That's what coaching is all about, lining up and playing games.

"We want to have this group of seniors finish off with a good feeling about what they were able to do at the end of the year. They've done a great job of really keeping the team together and making sure there wasn't any finger pointing, there wasn't anybody, any one group, that really had the wrong chemistry to give you your best chance. I think they've kept this team together very, very well."

Junior quarterback Jammal Lord agreed that the Cornhuskers haven't splintered, despite the turmoil. "That's not our attitude," he said. "That's not our mentality.

"We're just got to go out and play hard, no matter what happens."

He expects a good effort come Dec. 27.

"The season has been a bit of a disappointment," said Lord. "But the bowl game, it's a whole new season. We've just got to roll. You can't say, 'Well, our season is so and so, you can go out there and just mess around.' It's a game to be played, and hopefully, we can put up some points."

How many points? Lord suggested 60. "Why not?" he said.

Nebraska hasn't played in a bowl game as early as Dec. 27 since 1980, when it defeated Mississippi State in the Sun Bowl, 31-17, and 18 of the 21 bowls since then have been on Jan. 1 or after.

"So it will be a little different approach for us," Solich said.

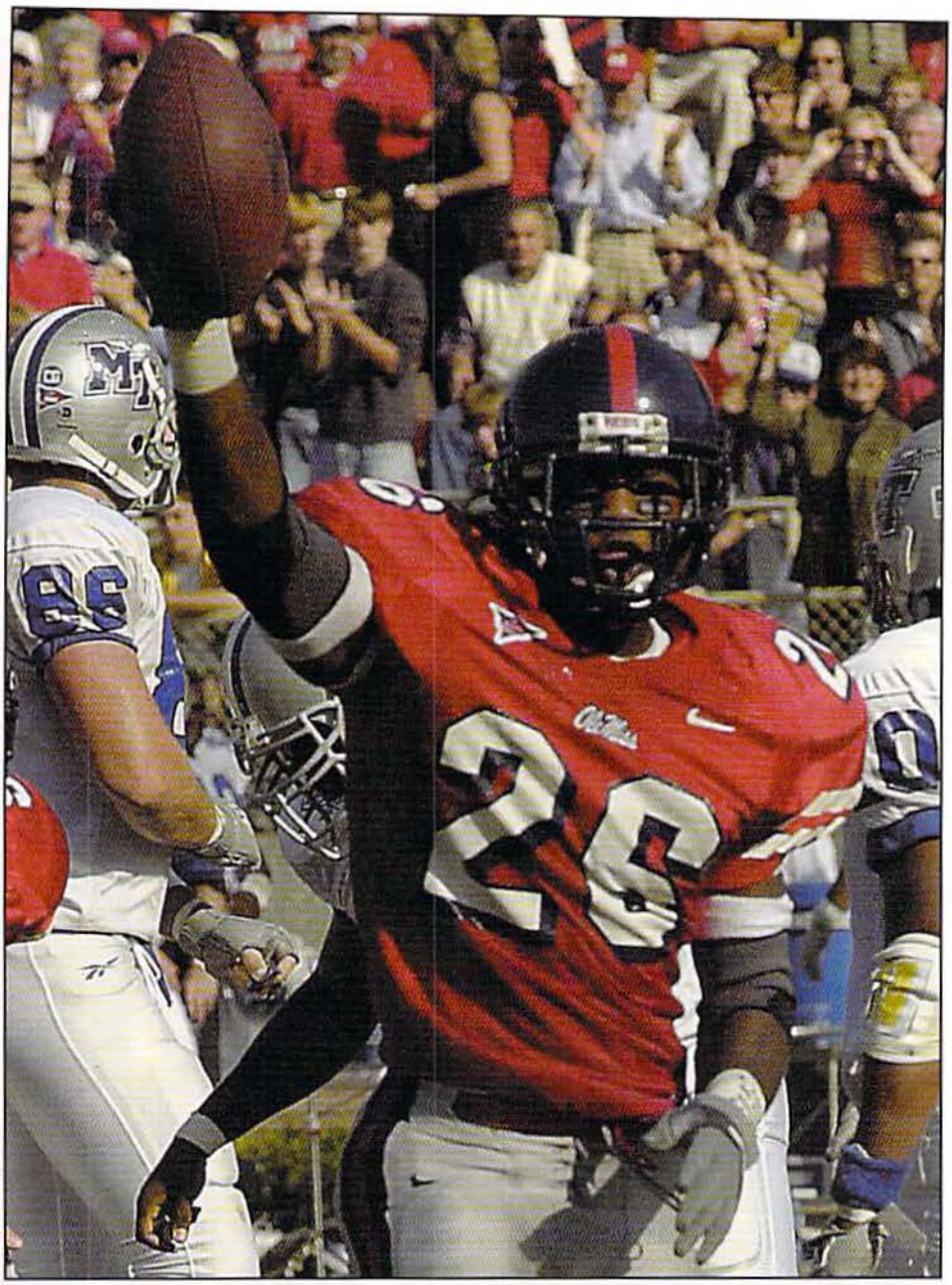
Among other things, there is no dead period in recruiting, so Solich and his remaining assistants are having to juggle recruiting travel with practice and game-plan preparation.

That shouldn't be a problem, however, according to Solich. "You need to be able in this business as a player to have total concentration on what you're doing, and the same for coaches," he said.

The additional practice time will have implications for next season, of course.

His goal "from now to the bowl game to next year (is) just get better," said Lord.

That can happen regardless of the weather in Shreveport on Dec. 27. ■



Sophomore free safety Eric Oliver is the Rebels' leading tackler with 118 stops, including four tackles for losses and one sack.

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Independence Bowl Results

2001 — Alabama 14, Iowa St 13
2000 — Mississippi St. 43, Texas A&M 41, ot
1999 — Mississippi 27, Oklahoma 25
1998 — Mississippi 35, Texas Tech 18
1997 — LSU 27, Notre Dame 9
1996 — Auburn 32, Army 29
1995 — LSU 45, Michigan St. 26
1994 — Virginia 20, TCU 10
1993 — Virginia Tech 45, Indiana 20
1992 — Wake Forest 39, Oregon 35
1991 — Georgia 24, Arkansas 15
1990 — Louisiana Tech 34, Maryland 34
1989 — Oregon 27, Tulsa 24
1988 — So. Mississippi 38, UTEP 18
1987 — Washington 24, Tulane 12
1986 — Mississippi 20, Texas Tech 17
1985 — Minnesota 20, Clemson 13
1984 — Air Force 23, Virginia Tech 7
1983 — Air Force 9, Mississippi 3
1982 — Wisconsin 14, Kansas St. 3
1981 — Texas A&M 33, Oklahoma St. 16
1980 — So. Mississippi 16, McNeese St. 14
1979 — Syracuse 31, McNeese St 7
1978 — E. Carolina 35, Louisiana Tech 13
1977 — Louisiana Tech 24, Louisville 14
1976 — McNeese St. 20, Tulsa 16

Nebraska will play Mississippi in the 27th Independence Bowl Dec. 27 at 3:30 p.m. (CST) at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, La.

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Breakout Game

Drevo helps Huskers bury Gophers with early onslaught

The Nebraska men's basketball team showed what it could do at its best, at home, with an 80-60 upset of Minnesota, which came to town ranked No. 17 and No. 20 in the polls.

Junior Andrew Drevo led the Cornhuskers with 27 points and 14 rebounds.

Drevo showed why Coach Barry Collier occasionally mentioned him last season, while he was sitting out after transferring from NCAA Division II Morningside College.

From the beginning, the 6-foot-8, 270-pound forward showed his offensive proficiency. "He had plenty of good practice playing offense, being the inside or even being the wing scorer for our scout team," Collier said, adding that Drevo also "got a lot of practice not playing defense last year."

Drevo's defense is improving, and his offense hasn't dropped off.

Andrew Drevo

Against Minnesota, the coaches' pick to finish second in the Big Ten, he hit 9-of-18 from the field, including 4-of-8 from 3-point range to improve his team-leading 3-point percentage to 45.

Collier wasn't surprised. "He didn't do anything he doesn't do every day. He just kind of did it all in a row," said Collier. Drevo scored 10 of the first 12 points as Nebraska bolted to a 16-0 lead.

His first two field goals were 3-pointers. "He's capable of shooting the ball deep, real deep," Collier said. "He's big and he can score. He's got great hands. He can catch and pass.

"He's a handful any time being able to pass the ball."

Given the choice, he would rather do that, Drevo said.

Scoring the way he did against the Golden Gophers is "something I'm capable of doing," he said. "But I'd just as soon pass the ball to an open teammate and they shoot it

"It could have been anybody out there that scored those points. Sometimes in the flow of the game you get more shots or you get more open looks than somebody else."

Collier noted that as well. Drevo "needs the help of his teammates to get that done because they screen for him and are patient," said Collier. "That's a tough combination."

Teammate Nate Johnson, a junior college transfer, agreed. "Nothing Drevo does surprises us because we all know what we're all capable of doing," Johnson said.

The bottom line on Drevo is, "he's a tough stop," Collier said. ■

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RIM SHOTS

Notes And Quotes From The Basketball World

BECOMING COMFORTABLE

The day before the Minnesota game, Coach Barry Collier took Nate Johnson aside and encouraged him to be more aggressive offensively. "I asked him how in the world did he score 25 points a game last year with the mentality that he's been playing with," said Collier. "We want him to attack more."

Johnson, the NJCAA Division II player of the year at Penn Valley, Mo., Community College, averaged 26.5 points per game, fifth-best in the nation.

Johnson is becoming more aggressive as he becomes more comfortable. "He wants to do it in the right way, and that's more than a little bit appreciated," Collier said.

"But he's learning how to do that, I think."

Johnson's initial hesitancy was, in part, based on a desire to fit in with his new teammates.

"I think he wants to be a part of a team family that contributes but doesn't have anybody trying to hog the spotlight or be selfish," said Collier. "He's quite unselfish."

"Right now, I'm in a learning experience," said Johnson, who averaged 12 points in the first six games. "I'm trying not to overdo it, just do enough that's going to help my teammates."

RED ZONE ASSIST

Collier credited the "Red Zone" student sections with an assist in the Cornhuskers' upset of Minnesota. The sections in the bleachers at both ends of the court "were in it right from the start," Collier said, noting that the students were "hassling the (Gopher) shooters in warm-ups."

The "Red Zone" energy made the crowd of 8,000 seem larger.

"Our fans, they were a big key in this thing, to come out and see all those people out there just screaming and hollering and jumping and whatever they were doing," said Johnson.

Collier claimed that there was a time when he would have joined in. "Turn back the clock and my face would be painted red and my hair (would be) on fire, too, if I was a student here," he said.

"We really appreciate their enthusiasm. It's fun."

OUR HOUSE

Former Cornhusker football All-American Broderick Thomas referred to Memorial Stadium as "our house." That's how the basketball team looks at the Devaney Sports Center arena.

"We feel like any time we step on the court, we can get a win, especially at home," Drevo said. "We need to defend this place. One of our goals this season is to win most of our games at home."

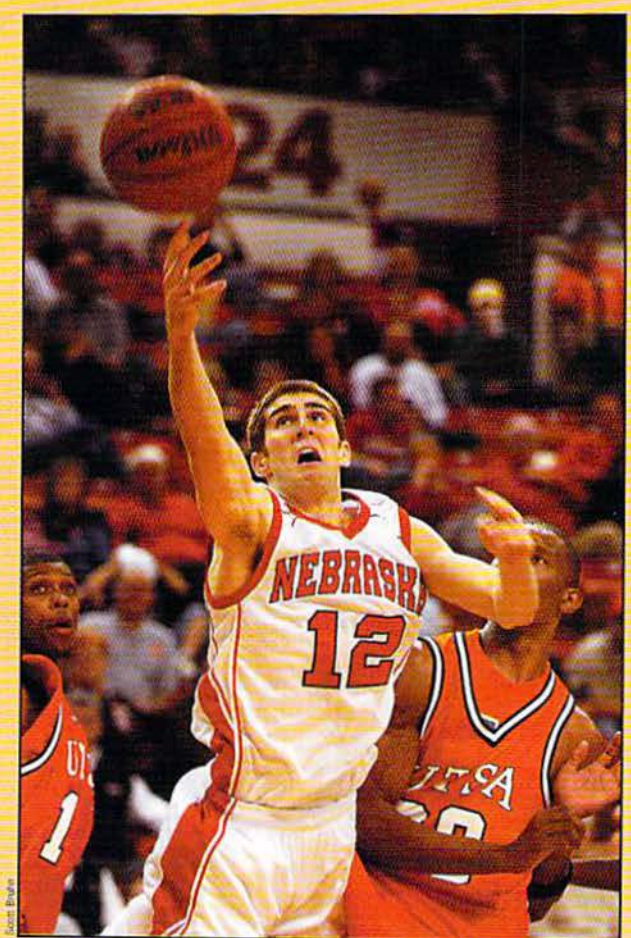
Controlling the home court is crucial to long-term success, according to Collier.

"You have to try to win virtually all of them at home and as many as you can on the road," he said. "But we're a long way from being a team that can just dominate at home and split on the road, something that usually puts you in the hunt for your conference championship."

HI JINX

You've heard about the "Sports Illustrated jinx," but a Huskers Illustrated jinx? Cornhusker senior Brennon Clemmons, who was featured in the previous issue, suffered dislocated toes on his right foot during a 69-53 victory against Texas-San Antonio in the home opener.

Clemmons played only 10 minutes against the Roadrunners, but pulled down six rebounds.



Scott Bruhn

Sophomore guard Jake Muhleisen had a career-high 10 assists against Minnesota.

Collier suspended him and Drevo for the final game of the Top of the World Classic, a 73-65 loss against Ball State, for their lack of intensity at the end of the previous game, a 64-61 loss against NCAA Division II Alaska-Fairbanks — which went on to win its own tournament.

Drevo has had to work on sustaining his intensity. "My nature is to let up once you get off to a little lead," he said. "It's kind of been my emphasis coming into college to not do that."

The suspensions enabled sophomore Corey Simms to step into the starting lineup, where he has remained with Clemmons sidelined by the foot injury.

Freshman Jason Dourisseau also has seen more playing time at guard.

Without Clemmons, Nebraska doesn't have a senior. Wilson Thomas, who is preparing for the Independence Bowl with the football team, hasn't announced whether he will play basketball this season. The 6-foot-5, 215-pound forward is included in the media guide and on the roster.

CAREER HIGHS

Sophomores Jake Muhleisen and John Turek made significant contributions to the Minnesota victory with career highs. Muhleisen had 10 assists. Turek tied his career best with five blocked shots. ■

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Staff Changes Alter Picture

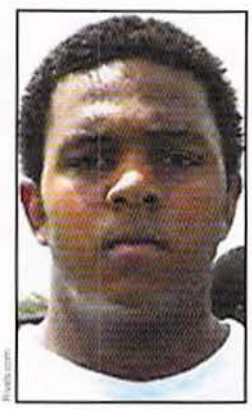
NU's graduate assistants take over recruiting responsibilities

By Doug Horwich

Nebraska Coach Frank Solich's announcement in early December that three assistants had been fired is one that is likely to have repercussions for the team's recruiting efforts for a number of reasons.

For starters, coaches Nelson Barnes and George Darlington had been actively recruiting in their territories when the announcement was made.

Barnes handled Nebraska's East Coast recruiting, in addition to the states of Tennessee, Ohio, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Mississippi, while Darlington's territory consisted of Southern California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and New Mexico.



Offensive guard prospect Ian-Yates Cunningham of Hebron High School in Lewisville, Texas, was one of several highly regarded recruits in Lincoln for the Nebraska-Colorado game.

Fortunately for the Huskers, former defensive coordinator Craig Bohl's departure does not directly affect any of Nebraska's recruits, as Bohl's responsibilities as a primary recruiter had been divided among the other staff members for the past year or so.

With Barnes and Darlington no longer out recruiting during this vital time in the season, Solich enlisted the services of graduate assistants Tim Albin and Jimmy Burrow in a temporary capacity. Both men were out on the road visiting with recruiting prospects almost immediately after the staff changes were announced.

However, the staff changes have also created an aura of uncertainty around the Husker program that has a number of recruits taking a wait-and-see approach.

Many defensive recruits are waiting to find out who Nebraska's next defensive coordinator will be. Defensive end, linebacker and defensive back recruits are waiting to see who will be hired to replace Barnes, Bohl and Darlington.

In addition to the uncertainty surrounding his defensive staff, Solich also had to contend with the fact that quarterbacks coach Turner Gill was a candidate for at least one offensive coordinator position, and perhaps even a head coaching position. Gill is the key recruiter for a number of top Husker targets, including Brett Byford and Tommy Zbikowski, so his departure could have a devastating effect on Nebraska's recruiting efforts.

Despite a disappointing showing on the field, Nebraska played host to several recruits the weekend after Thanksgiving, including defensive tackle Donnell Livingston (6-foot-2, 290 pounds, 5.0 40-yard dash) from Sarasota, Fla., as well as Texas offensive linemen Will Oliver (6-4, 265, 5.0) from Lindale and Ian-Yates Cunningham (6-5, 300, 5.0) from Hebron High School in Lewisville.

Livingston moved his visit ahead after his team fell short in the playoffs.

"I originally planned to take it on Dec. 13, but we didn't make the state

Nebraska Commitments for 2003

Player	Hometown (school)	Ht.	Wt.	Pos.
Greg Austin	Cypress, Texas	6-2	275	OL
Andy Birkel	Lincoln (Southeast), Neb.	6-3	180	WR
Steve Craver	Hurst, Texas	6-2	195	DB/LB
Josh Mueller	Columbus (Lakeview), Neb.	6-7	250	TE
*Trevor Neeman	Lincoln (Southeast), Neb.	6-3	225	TE/DE
*Kade Pittman	North Platte, Neb.	6-0	190	RB/DB
Bo Ruud	Lincoln (Southeast), Neb.	6-3	210	LB
Brandon Teamer	Omaha (Central), Neb.	6-5	256	DE

*scheduled to enter school in the fall of 2002 as part-time students and receive scholarships in January 2003.

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playoffs, and I really wanted to see Nebraska," he said.

Livingston said he enjoyed the visit to Lincoln and the time he spent with the players.

"I'm thinking it went pretty well," he said. "I really enjoyed it. I had two hosts — Fabian Washington and Benard Thomas. Fabian is from around my area, so I already knew all about him. I had a great time hanging around with them. They reminded me of all my friends back home.

"Fabian and Benard showed me the dorms and everything. I didn't know that you could move out of them after your freshman year. There are a lot of the players who move in together after their freshman year and live in houses or apartments. I like that."

Like many visitors, Livingston was impressed by Nebraska's vast weight complex.

"I loved the weight room," he said. "It was tight. I had never seen machines like that before. I got to play around with them on my own. It was pretty cool."

Livingston heard about potential coaching changes on his visit, but the changes have not affected his interest in the program.

"I looked at it as kind of positive because it just shows that I can help them out," he said. "I also like how the fans stick around after the game and get your autograph and everything."

Livingston received a much-anticipated Husker offer during the visit.

"Coach Solich offered me when I talked to him in his office," Livingston said. "He said that they really want me to go there."

Livingston plans to visit North Carolina, Maryland, Mississippi and either Florida State or North Carolina State before making a decision.

Guard prospect Cunningham was also impressed by his trip to Lincoln.

"It went real well," he said. "I liked everything about it. I liked my host Richie Incognito a lot. We hung out the whole time, and I really liked him. The weight room and other facilities are top-notch. I had a great time."

Cunningham has also developed a good rapport with offensive line

Recruiting Notes

Five Prospects Key for Huskers

By Rick Shaw

Heading down the home stretch of the recruiting season, I consider the following five prospects to be keys to Nebraska's recruiting fortunes:

1. Tommy Zbikowski, quarterback, 6-foot-1, 190-pounds, Buffalo Grove, Ill. — Zbikowski has been high on Nebraska's wish list since late last spring, and as we close out December, he looms as possibly the biggest prospect left on their board. Considered to be one of the top eight dual-threat quarterback prospects in the country by Rivals.com, Zbikowski has attracted scholarship offers from close to 40 Division I programs. His top three schools are Notre Dame, Nebraska, and Iowa. Although his family have always been fans of the "Fighting Irish," Nebraska is the only one of his favorites which wants him to play quarterback. Zbikowski was scheduled to make his official visit to Lincoln on Dec. 20.

"I'm kind of leaning to playing quarterback in college," Zbikowski said. "It's tough giving up the chance to have the ball on every play. But Notre Dame offers a very fine education, so there are some other things I need to consider, too."

2. Ian-Yates Cunningham, offensive guard, 6-5, 300, Lewisville, Texas — Cunningham is regarded as one of the top players in Texas and one of the top 15 offensive guard prospects in the country. He visited Nebraska for the Colorado game on Nov. 29 and came away impressed. Cunningham has narrowed his choices to Nebraska, Georgia Tech, and Virginia and will likely make a decision before Christmas.

"My visit went real well," Cunningham said. "I love Nebraska's coaching staff. Coach (Milt) Tenopir and Coach (Dan) Young know what they are talking about, and Coach (Frank) Solich is just incredible."

3. Donald DeFrand, cornerback, 6-1, 175, Dodge City, Kan. — DeFrand, a speedy cornerback prospect from Dodge City Community College, is a prospect who could provide an immediate impact for the Husker secondary. A visitor to Lincoln on Nov. 8, DeFrand lists Nebraska as an early favorite. He also is considering offers from Tennessee, Kansas State, Florida State, Texas Tech and others.

"I really hit it off with the Nebraska players when I was there," DeFrand said. "If I had to make a decision today, it would be Nebraska."

4. Brett Byford, offensive guard, 6-4, 290, Hartselle, Ala. — Considered one of the top 20 guard prospects, Byford was an early target of Husker coaches. He was scheduled to visit Nebraska on Dec. 20 and hoped to make a decision soon after. Byford has had Nebraska leading from the start over Georgia Tech, Clemson, South Carolina and others.

"I still like Nebraska best," Byford said. "I'd like to get this over with by Christmas or New Year's if I can."

5. Kyle Caldwell, defensive end, 6-4, 255, Scottsdale, Ariz. — Caldwell is rated among the top 11 defensive ends by Rivals.com. He lists the Huskers along with Arizona State, UCLA, and Oregon as favorites. He was scheduled to visit Lincoln Dec. 13.

"Nebraska has great tradition," Caldwell said, "and it seems that they are always contending for the national championship." ■

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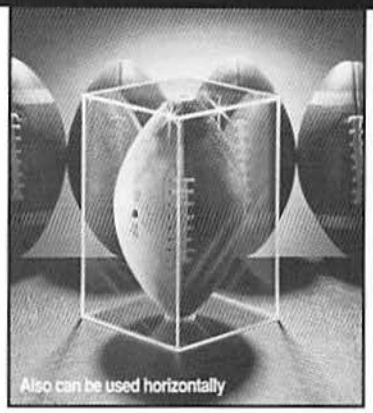

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coaches Milt Tenopir and Dan Young.

The Husker staff let Cunningham know in no uncertain terms that he's one of their top targets this year.

"Coach Solich said that he was very happy that I considered them for one of my visits," he said. "He told me how they need me to come to Nebraska and contribute to the team. He said that there's a spot for me on the team and how excited he was that I was there.

"He said that they had an 'off' year this season, but that everybody has a tough year now and then, and they have a lot of young guys back for the next few years."

Cunningham enjoyed spending the weekend with friend Oliver and new acquaintance Martin O'Donnell, an offensive tackle from Downers Grove, Ill., who has since committed to Illinois.

"Will Oliver and I met Martin O'Donnell, and we all hung out together with Richie, Nick Povendo and Dane Todd," he said. "Will and Martin both seemed to really like Nebraska, too. We were all happy with the facilities and the coaching staff."

Cunningham had December visits scheduled for Georgia Tech and Virginia.

"As of now, those are the only two other visits I will be taking," he said. It may be before Christmas. I'll do it whenever I feel the time is right."

Center recruit Oliver accompanied Cunningham on the trip and also had a great time.

"My host was Nick Povendo," he said. "I felt like I connected alright with the two hosts and the players."

Oliver had committed to Texas A&M but decommitted after only one month and is now completely open. He was impressed by Nebraska's legendary fan support.

"It's not even close," Oliver said. "NU has a much better fan base than A&M. The atmosphere Friday at the game was electric. I really watched the offensive line play, and it looked like they did a good job. I feel comfortable about the depth chart and their style of play for me."

Oliver also is considering Texas Tech, Northwestern and Texas Christian. ■

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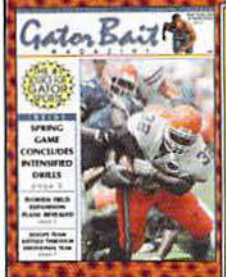

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15 Bill Byrne's school before Nebraska
16 NU's No. 57
18 Number of NU road victories in 2002
20 NU's bowl location
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27 NU graduate assistant and former Husker
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2 Mississippi quarterback
4 Ex-NU kicker now with Houston Texans
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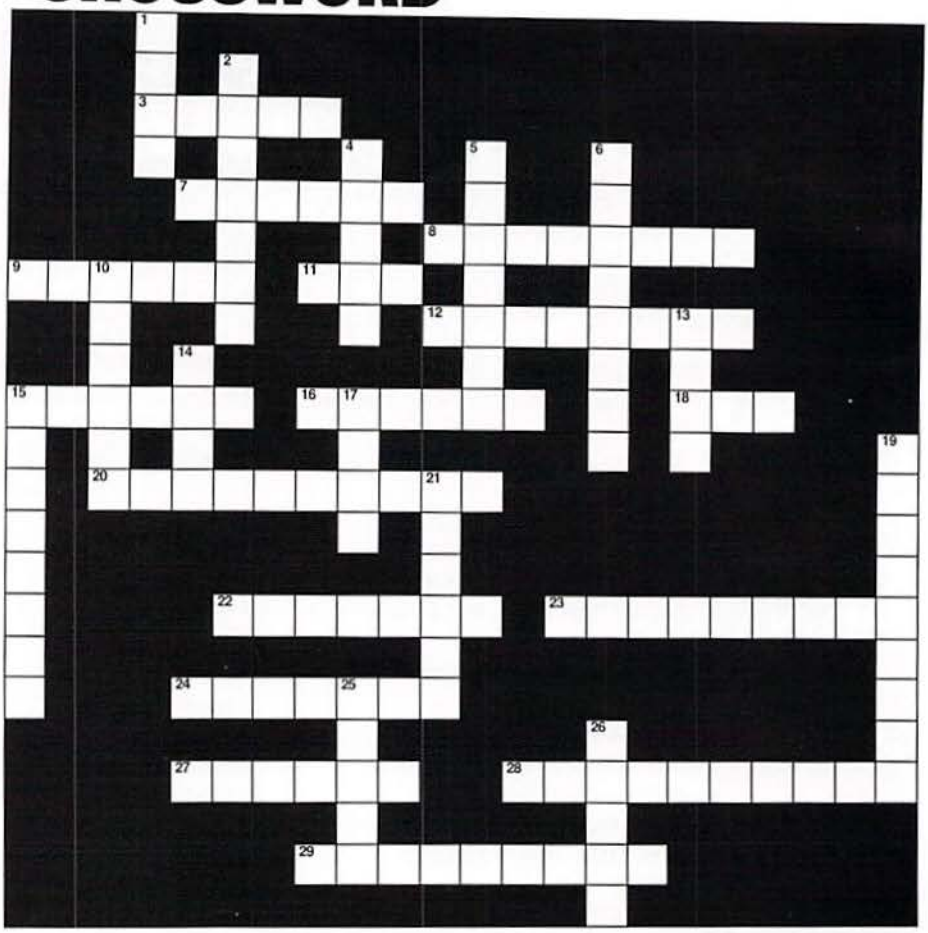

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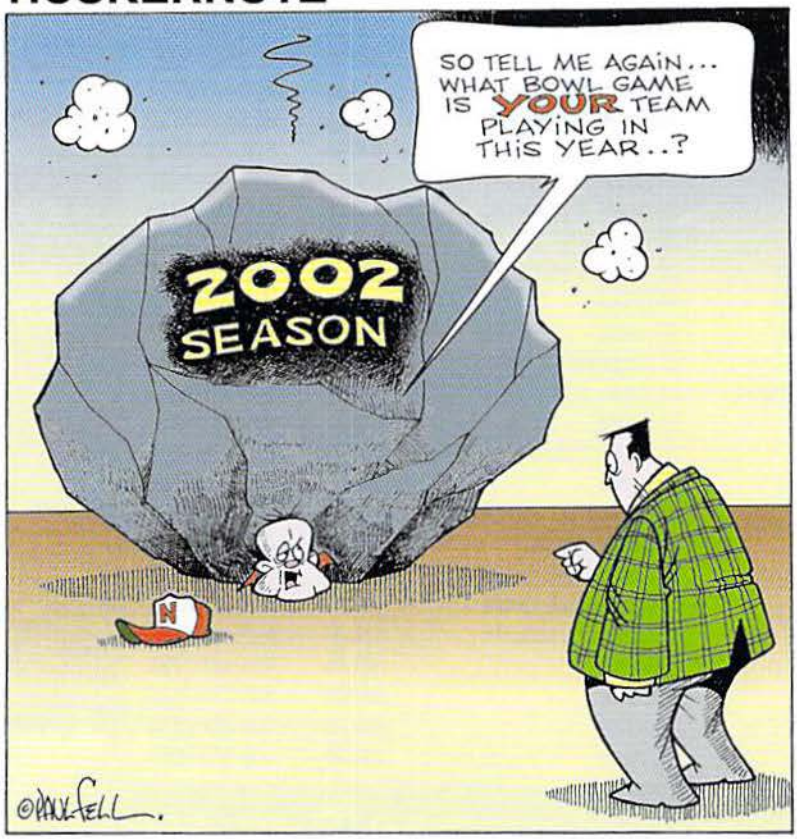

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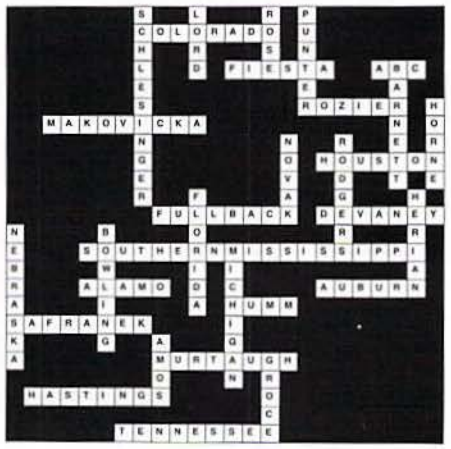

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Learning Experience

Husker Century video convinces freshman Smith of the responsibility he and his teammates have

Mike BABCOCK

LE KEVIN SMITH GAINED a new appreciation for the Nebraska football program after watching the recently released third and final video in the Husker Century series.

The video covers the Tom Osborne era, from 1973 to 1997, with game footage interspersed with remarks from former players and coaches, as well as national sports writers and sportscasters. Former Cornhusker Trev Alberts, now a college football analyst for ESPN, is the narrator.

Alberts was a Blackshirt, a Butkus Award winner at outside linebacker.

The video was a learning experience for Smith, a redshirted freshman defensive tackle from Macon, Ga. "Being a person from out of state, not really knowing the history, it gave me like a sense of pride to be here," he said. "I want to be here, I want to be a Blackshirt.

"It showed me what it actually means to be in this program."

It also convinced him of the responsibility he and his teammates have to sustain the program, something that hasn't happened this season — with the most losses since 1961.

The Cornhuskers will have an opportunity to reclaim some measure of pride against Mississippi, in the schools' first meeting in football, at the Independence Bowl.

Le Kevin Smith said the Huskers need to make a point.

"That's what I feel we've got to come out and play for in this last game," said Smith. "We've got to come out and let people know we're still the same team that it's been. It doesn't matter who we're lining up against. The goal is just going to be to go down and destroy them, and make a point."

That the Independence Bowl is Nebraska's holiday destination indicates not only the travel reputation of Cornhusker fans but also the extent of the precipitous slide this season.

The Independence Bowl had the first pick among four lower-tier bowls involving Big 12 teams and could have done better than Nebraska, if record had been the determining factor.

Nebraska and Mississippi have a combined record of 13-12, and both were 3-5 in conference play, prompting Newsday's Chuck Culpepper to pick the Independence Bowl as "the worst."

However, it almost lost that dubious distinction among 28 bowls, "for staging the surreal sight of royal Nebraska playing in the Independence Bowl," Culpepper wrote, "but not quite."

No disrespect to the Independence Bowl, which has a $1.2 million payout and has produced some excitement in recent seasons, but the Cornhuskers don't belong in Shreveport.

The truth is, they probably don't belong in any bowl game this season, for practical reasons unrelated to record or destination. Though he claims otherwise, preparing for the game is a distraction Coach Frank Solich doesn't need as he restructures his staff and addresses recruiting issues.

Because of what happened against Colorado last season, recruiting was set aside for a time in December, a crucial period, while the coaches attempted to correct the problems.

Now, Solich is faced with more significant problems, identifying defensive and offensive coordinators and replacing two other assistants. The longer that process takes, the more impact it will have on recruiting. During the interim, Nebraska must persuade athletes to come play for unidentified coaches.

In addition, Cornhusker coaches, with graduate assistants Jimmy Burrow and Tim Albin assuming full-time responsibilities, are traveling to recruit while preparing for the bowl. Recruiting is the lifeblood of every program. Nebraska can't afford to set it aside, even briefly, in another December.

Given the problems this season, with a propensity toward penalties and an inordinate number of what have been characterized as "little mistakes here and there," game after game, the odds would seem to be against Nebraska's turning in an aesthetically pleasing effort on Dec. 27.

Plus, the Cornhuskers will have to deal with the throwing of Eli Manning, who isn't on a par with his famous older brother but has completed 58 percent of his 437 passes.

That's not to say Nebraska won't win. The Cornhuskers have shown flashes of the brilliance that have come to characterize the tradition portrayed in the Husker Century videos.

Plus, the attitude of the players during the first bowl practice was reason for optimism.

"It was a real fired-up day," said Smith. "They've got everybody fired up on defense, all practice. I think people are starting to realize what we have here and what we need to do.

"We're just like a bunch of mad dogs getting after it."

Although Nebraska goes into the bowl game with a lower national ranking in total offense than in total defense, the Blackshirts have taken the biggest hit this season.

Their confidence hasn't been shattered, however. "I think the guys know what they can do," Smith said. "They have a good understanding of what we're all capable of if we keep together and actually play as a team. When we come together and play as a team, we can roll the top dog."

Mississippi might not be a top dog, but the defense intends to treat the Rebels that way. "We're going to have to line up and play hard-nosed, old-school Husker football," said Smith.

"We've just got to be mean as hell up front," a quality evident on the Husker Century video. ■

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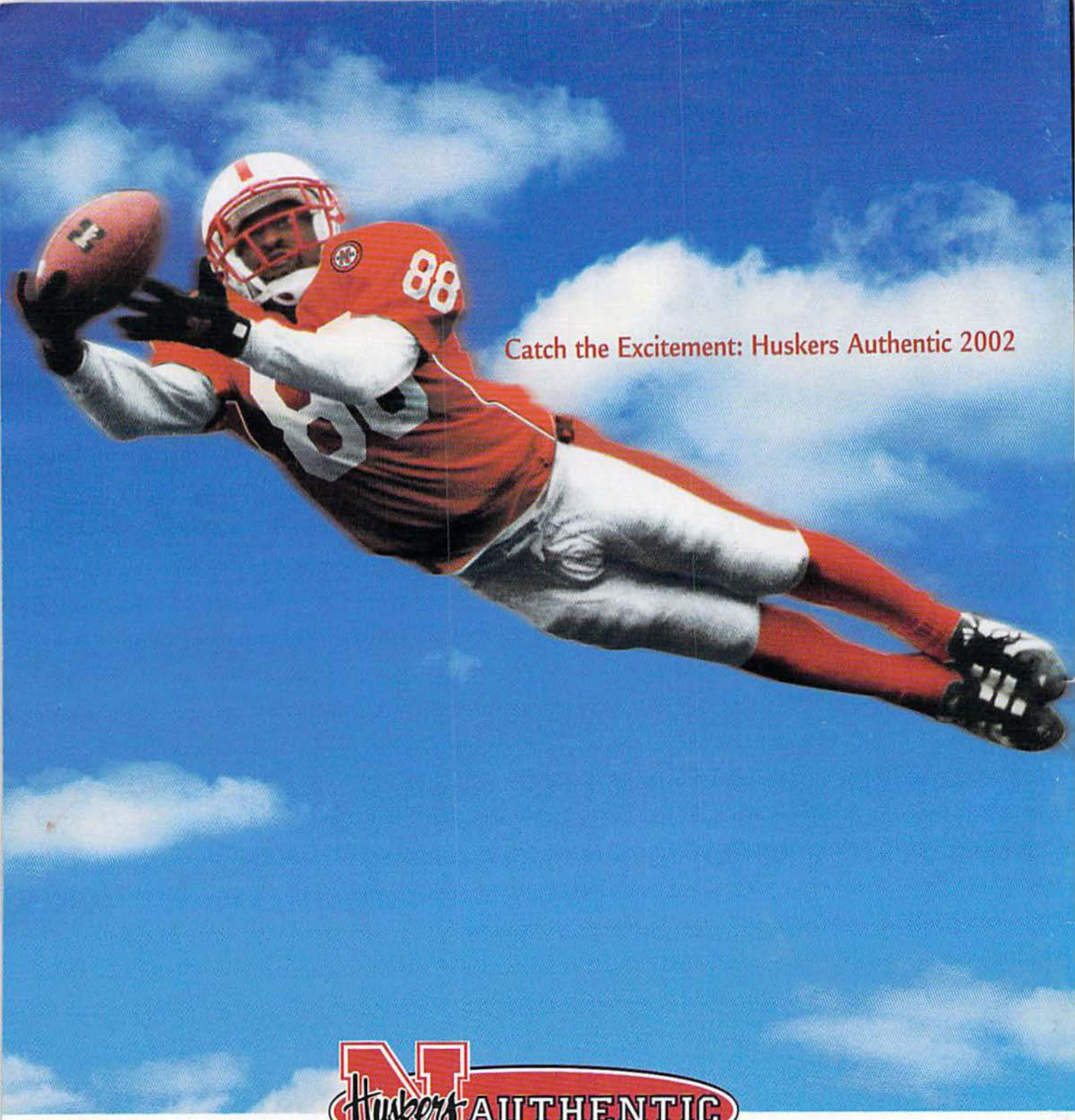

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